

PROMISES

GREGORY O. SCOTT

For Elaine and Troy.
Finishing the job.

Dramatis Personae

- Tenel Ka Djo, Queen of Hapes (human female)
Chazdrul Harn, XO, *Wayward Soldier* (Baragwin male)
Rahley Muro, captain, *Mandala* (human female)
Evan Praelyx, captain, *Wayward Soldier* (Yuuzhan
Vong male)
Tahiri Veila, former Jedi Knight and Sith apprentice
(human female)
Revli Vjarna, co-pilot, *Mandala* (Bimm male)
Zekk, Jedi Knight (human male)
Taryn Zel, Hapan royal agent (human female)
Trista Zel, Hapan royal agent (human female)

PROLOGUE: LOSSES

Ancient ice, shattered to gleaming particles, drifted through the vacuum and shone white in the light of distant stars. A narrow channel of open space cut through the ice, creating the lone passable route by which a ship could slip through the Hapan Spine to the isolated world of Shedu Maad. Like the rest of the Transitory Mists that cloaked Hapan space from the rest of the galaxy and made tangled labyrinths of its interior transit routes, the ice-clouds were countless millennia old, and the channel between them had passed nearly all that time unnoticed by human navigators, free to continue its peaceful timeless passage through the cosmos.

It had certainly never seen a moment like this, not in all its millennia.

The attacking fleet still hovered outside the channel's choke point, as though still undecided whether to push through toward its target: Uroro Station, where a handful of Jedi Knights had gathered to act as bait for the combined Alliance/Imperial fleet to distract it from the real Jedi hideaway on Shedu Maad. If the enemy were willing to cross the pass it was certain they could: at the head of the formation was the black-hulled *Imperial*-class star destroyer *Anakin Solo*, personal

command ship of the Galactic Alliance's Chief of State. Right on its shoulder, nearly twelve times as long, was the pale sword-shaped *Vengeance*-class super star destroyer *Megador*, largest vessel in the Imperial Remnant navy and mightiest serving warship in the entire galaxy. Behind *Megador* and *Anakin Solo*, waiting like scavenger birds, were another half-dozen wedge-shaped star destroyers captained by power-hungry Imperial Moffs eager to claim some credit for the slaughter.

As she stood on the deck of her command ship, the *Dragon Queen*, Queen Mother Tenel Ka thought how sadly appropriate it was that nearly all the warships coming to attack the hidden Jedi base were from the Imperial Navy. That the sole exception was the *Anakin Solo*, commanded by a man who'd willingly remade himself in the image of his grandfather Darth Vader, made it even worse.

That Tenel Ka had once loved that man more than anything in the galaxy made the scene more awful than words could describe.

On the other end of the passage that had come to be called the Throat, the double-disc shape of the *Dragon Queen* sat paired with the *Deserving Gem*, two defenders to Uroto Station that would sweeten the bait while the rest of the Hapan Home Fleet waited in the icy gasses of the Throat to spring their ambush. Tenel Ka had brought every ship she could to defend the Jedi base from the man who'd once been Jacen Solo, but so far the enemy fleet seemed content to sit at the far side of the Throat, waiting.

Tenel Ka closed her eyes and allowed herself to reach out with the Force across the gap. She didn't search for the man who called himself Darth Caedus; she couldn't bear to, and had been trying so hard to block every

memory of him she'd ever had, knowing she'd fail. Instead, she tried to find her father in the Force. Her father was no Jedi, but sometimes, when he was close enough, she could sense his unique presence nonetheless.

When her cousins had brought the news that Prince Isolder's ship had been intercepted and captured by the *Anakin Solo*, Tenel Ka's first reaction had been a desperate disbelief, almost a prayer, that Caedus would not kill her father. After watching him burn Kashyyyk and kidnap their own child she knew he was capable of anything, but she prayed that he was at least still sane enough to know the value of a hostage.

With her eyes closed, she took in a deep breath, then breathed out. In and out, as she'd learned at the Jedi Academy on Yavin 4 so long ago. With Jacen.

In and out. She sensed a dim but familiar presence, anxious but not, it seemed, in pain. Her father was not Force-sensitive so even if she tried to touch him he couldn't touch her back. Still, she found some comfort in his presence, as distant as it was.

It meant their plan still had a chance of working.

A voice behind her asked, "My Queen, are you all right?"

Tenel Ka opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder. The commander of the Hapan Fleet, Lenola Baas, was a tall black-haired woman who managed to look glamorous even in her gray admiral's uniform. Her blue eyes narrowed in concern as she asked, "Your Majesty, is something wrong?"

"No," Tenel Ka said. "I only sensed my father is still alive."

There was a long history of animosity toward Jedi in Hapes, but best Tenel Ka could see, Admiral Baas was not put off by her mention of the Force. The admiral

instead gave a curt nod and said, "Then the plan still stands a small chance of success."

Baas was not a woman to surgarcoat things. Tenel Ka didn't mind at all. The Home Fleet could never match *Megador* and five star destroyers in a pitched fight, but the hope was to act as a lure so that the Jedi in their StealthX fighters could ambush and board *Anakin Solo*, freeing Isolder and killing Jacen.

No, she told herself. Darth Caedus was what he called himself now. She had to keep telling herself that, even after all he'd done. It was the only way to keep from going mad. The Jacen she'd loved, the Jacen she'd had a child with, was already dead.

She had a feeling she'd spend the rest of her life telling herself that, and still not believe it.

There was a call from the other side of the bridge. Admiral Baas's dark brows drew together as she announced, "The Jedi have begun to move."

Tenel Ka greeted the news with a nod. Clearly, they hoped to end the enemy's indecision and draw them into the ambush. Though it was impossible to see with her naked eyes, she could sense them in the Force: Master Skywalker, Lowbacca, Kyp and Corran and all the other Jedi she'd known for more than half her life.

Jaina and Zekk were at the forefront, flying wing-to-wing into Caedus' maw.

"The Jedi are engaging *Anakin Solo*'s fighter screen," an officer reported. "The Wookiee fighters are moving in as well."

"*Megador* is still holding position," another reported.

At the far end of the Throat, Tenel Ka saw tiny flashes of light. She opened herself further to the Force, to everyone except Jacen, dreading the loss of yet another person dear to her yet deep down already half-resigned to it.

The battle continued and the loss didn't come, but she knew it would. It was only a matter of time.

Zekk swore as he bent low inside the cockpit of his StealthX, trying to bring his navigational computer back online. After too-long minutes of fierce fighting, he and Jaina had cut power to their engines and allowed their battered black fighters to drift through space while the battle still raged around *Anakin Solo* beneath them. On the far side of Jacen's star destroyer, the giant *Megador* began to open fire with its long-range batteries to batter the Hapan fleet at the far side of the Throat.

He crossed one more set of wires and the green light of his navicomp came back online. He checked to see whether power had come back to his comm systems, but there was no such luck. He hadn't expected it to come back either; his fighter had taken so much damage already it was a miracle the engines still worked. Hardly anything else did; three of his four wingtip laser cannons had been torn up and life support was gone, leaving him to breathe through the sealed respiration system of his vac suit.

But the engines still worked, and he still had two shadow bombs left in his launch tubes. That was all he needed.

He looked out his cockpit to see Jaina's ship drifting alongside him. He could barely make out the shape of her helmet, seemingly unmoving. He gave her a nudge with the Force and she looked in his direction. He threw her a simple thumbs-up signal, denoting he was ready for an attack run.

Jaina returned it. He felt her reach out with the Force to touch him again, to hold on to him, to share a little bit of his senses as they both carefully warmed their

engines back up again and prepared for an attack run on *Anakin Solo's* bridge.

Even as combat flared around them he couldn't stop himself from thinking of the time when Jaina's touch had meant so much more. It had been five years since their experience with the Killiks, when as Joiners they'd found themselves sharing thought and physical sensation in a way even Jedi rarely accomplished. He'd been shocked by how reluctant he was to let go of that link; during the Yuuzhan Vong War he'd let Jaina drift away from him, or maybe he'd drifted away from her, but when they'd found themselves working together again he'd found all his old feelings from their teenage years come alive again. It had made him *feel* alive in a way that he hadn't thought possible after the Vong War had beaten so much out of him, out of everyone.

But even as he'd pressed for her affections he'd known, deep down, that she hadn't shared them in a long, long time. He'd finally gotten himself to accept that fact while Jaina had been away, training on Mandalore for the grim, awful purpose of hunting down and killing her own brother. There were a few times before her return when he'd honestly thought he might not ever see her again, and the possibility had filled him with relief.

He felt something like a soft slap in the Force. Jaina had felt a bit of his wandering thoughts and was trying to tell him this wasn't the time.

She was damned right about that.

He sent her a *let's do this* through the Force and started up his engines.

The two fighters plunged down toward the black wedge of Jacen's star destroyer. The gunners were so busy trying to find off the other Jedi and Wookiee fighters that were swarming over its hull that they

didn't notice the two matte-black X-wings falling onto their command tower.

The targeting system on Zekk's fighter was also down, but that didn't matter. He wasn't going to use it anyway, not for this. The torpedoes in his tubes had had their propulsion systems stripped out and replaced with additional charges. Using the Force to throw projectiles, robbing enemy targeting computers of thrust-trails to track, was a trick they'd picked up in the Yuuzhan Vong War, but Zekk had long ago lost compunction about using them in this conflict too.

He sent Jaina another nudge in the Force, telling her to fire on the spherical shield projector to the right of *Anakin Solo's* bridge tower. They cut their engines and let inertia glide them across the destroyer's hull, right toward the tower. The shield projector loomed so close it filled Zekk's view.

Now, Jaina sent. *Now now now now now!*

In one instant, Zekk fired his engines up against and pulled the trigger on his control stick. His last two torps were ejected from the fighter's nose, and even as he soared upward in a steep climb he grabbed them both with the Force and hurled them against the command tower's shields.

He couldn't tell if his torpedoes hit the target first or Jaina's, but it didn't really matter. The explosion ripped through the shields and exploded the generators, spilling mechanical entrails into space and sending a shuddering collapse rippling through the rest of *Anakin Solo's* defensive systems.

Before Zekk could send out a declaration of triumph through the Force, something clipped his bottom-port S-foil and sent him spinning.

Zekk swore and tried to wrestle his ship back under control. That was when his engines finally burst.

Starlight and explosions and laserfire and gnarled debris swirled on all sides. His hand found the ejection lever beneath his seat and he pulled it.

His pock-marked cockpit windshield burst overhead. Zekk fell out into endless space, spinning so fast he lost all sense of direction. He called on the Force to slow his spin, to stabilize himself, until he finally could make sense of what lay beyond his breath-fogged vac suit goggles.

He saw *Anakin Solo* ringed by debris, much of it from the destroyer itself. He saw *Megador's* pale sword spearing lasers blasts toward the Hapan fleet. He saw the vast spread of ice sparkling particles that boxed them all into this narrow desolate piece of space. He seemed to be falling toward them.

Then something hard slammed into him and he saw nothing, felt nothing, knew nothing at all.

The assault shuttle shuddered as it entered the friction of Shedu Maad's upper atmosphere, jarring Tahiri Veila in her crash webbing and knocking her black plasteel armor shoulder-plates with the white ones of the stormtroopers who were jammed into this craft with her. Not for the first time since climbing into this boat, she tried to figure out how she'd gotten here.

Causality seemed a simple enough chain. An hour before she'd been in a StealthX fighter over Shedu Maad, scanning for signs of Jedi or Hapan activity. An hour before *that*, she'd been getting her orders to scout this place by Darth Caedus, or Jacen Solo, or whatever he was or had become. And further back the causation chain went, all trailing back from this current moment, where she stood prepared to help a bunch of Imperial stormtroopers slaughter the Jedi she'd known almost all her life.

But no, she wasn't prepared. Ever since she'd apprenticed herself to Caedus, or Jacen, whatever he'd been when he started taking her on flow-walking trips back to see Anakin, she'd been suspicious of his motives and unsure what path to take. When he'd started asking her to betray the Jedi Order- the only real family she'd had since leaving her Tusken clan as a small child- she'd found ways to justify it.

It had been sickeningly easy. The galaxy was in chaos and needed order. Someone had to keep the Alliance from fracturing and Luke Skywalker was too broken-up by his wife's assassination to hold things together. Sometimes hard decisions had to be made and awful responsibility had to be shouldered for the good of others. Moralizing was a luxury a soldier couldn't afford.

Maybe that was what Caedus told himself. She didn't even know anymore, because beneath all those rationalizations had been the simple desperate *need* to see Anakin again, to give him the kiss she'd promised at Myrkr and never been able to give. To pretend she could undo half her life.

And Caedus had used that need to turn her into his creature, which was why, on his orders, she was on this attack shuttle right now, preparing to take the final step and betray everything and everyone she'd believed in.

Tahiri felt like she was about to throw up.

From the cockpit the pilot announced, "Hitting lower atmo. Prepare for landing cycle."

Tahiri glanced at all the faceless white masks around her. Men like these had slaughtered hundreds of Jedi before she was born, and now she would help them again. Help them against her *friends*. She didn't know why she'd ever been stupid or desperate or addicted enough to find this anything other than horrifying. She wanted to vomit in her lap. She wanted to push open

the airlock and leap and fall and splatter into the jungle bellow.

But none of that would happen. Her stomach jumped into her chest as the shuttle's repulsors kicked in, arresting its fall. There was one last heavy shudder as they set down on the ground.

"Landing zone secure," the pilot announced. "Stand by for deployment."

The stormtroopers began unbuckling their crash webbing. They stood up from their couches and gave their kits one more look-over, checking their rifles and blaster pistols and stun grenades. Tahiri rose on shaky legs and took the lightsaber off her belt.

When she looked up they had all turned to her. Over a dozen faceless white masks stared at her with mirror-black visors, awaiting orders.

She looked at the squad sergeant standing next to her. She saw her reflection in his visor: a small woman in black combat armor, blond hair tied tightly at the back of her neck, face pale and sallow, green eyes sunken. The three scars on her forehead, left behind by a Yuuzhan Vong shaper more than half a life ago, stood out like an accusation. She remembered the vision Anakin had once had of what she'd have been if she'd been successfully created into a Yuuzhan Vong/Jedi hybrid as the mad shaper Meezhan Kwaad had intended. In Anakin's vision she'd been the worst of both cultures, a barbaric, sadistic dark Jedi who destroyed everything she touched.

His dream had come true after all.

The realization shook her. Her knees went weak. The sergeant grabbed her shoulder and asked, "Colonel Veila, are you all right?"

No. She was nothing close to all right and never would be again.

But she swallowed and said, "Yes, I'm fine."

"What are your orders?"

There was only one order she could give. There was only one possibility she'd left herself after selling herself to Caedus in an act of contemptible weakness.

She thumbed her lightsaber into ignition and said, "Follow my lead."

Tenel Ka had trained all her life to be a Dathomiri warrior like her mother, a woman who wore the skins of animals and fought with kicks and elbows, spear-thrusts and adrenaline and sweat. That made it all the more frustrating now to be aboard *Dragon Queen*, watching as the battle continued on. The Jedi and Wookiee starfighter attacks had badly crippled *Anakin Solo*, but the Jedi had in turn been badly battered in the fight. From the reports relayed to her bridge, the Jedi said that they'd been unable to launch their planned boarding parties to rescue Isolder.

Her father wasn't yet dead. She believed, knew, that she'd feel that death in the Force. Yet the reports also said that Zekk, her friend since their days as teenagers at the Jedi Academy, had gone missing in action, and she hadn't felt that at all.

The reports also said Jaina had boarded *Anakin Solo* and was hunting her brother right now.

Tenel Ka yearned to be out there, helping them in some way, but instead she remained on *Dragon Queen* with Admiral Baas, watching as the Imperials finally began to send their star destroyers down the Throat. Several other double-disc battle dragon warships moved out from the ice fields to engage the first two star destroyers through the choke-point, while a few sleek Nova cruisers slipped ahead and began launching Miy'til fighters and bombers to counter the initial wave

of TIE Interceptors and Scimitar bombers. The Jedi fighters, meanwhile, had been forced to pull back to defend Uroro Station from *Megador*, though how Master Skywalker's StealthX fighters could hold off that behemoth, Tenel Ka had no idea.

As she watched from the command deck's forward viewport, the foremost Battle Dragon unleashed a wave of concussion missiles that bombarded the lead star destroyer on its port side while a Nova cruiser and its Miy'til bombers tried to squeeze the ship from the starboard. The enemy was close enough now that she could see its shields shudder under so many explosions and finally die, leaving its hull exposed to continued warhead barrages that began to chew up its nose like a swarm of hungry piranha beetles.

The crew of the royal flagship was too professional to start cheering, but Tenel Ka could feel newfound confidence radiate off everyone through the Force. That confidence suddenly evaporated when, less than a minute later, the Nova cruiser was snapped in two by a double-wave of concussion missiles launched from a group of Scimitar bombers. The bombers and TIEs continued to pummel the broken halves of the cruiser and Tenel Ka knew Hapan sailors were dying by the hundreds, in hot fire or freezing space.

Then it hit her.

Tenel Ka's knees went weak beneath her. It was impossible to draw breath. She nearly fell onto the deck, in front of all her subjects, when Admiral Baas hooked her arm around Tenel Ka's and sharply drew her upright.

In a hushed voice she asked, "Your Majesty, what has happened?"

For a moment it seemed like she couldn't speak, that a black hole had opened inside her and was sucking her

entire being into nothing. Then she found the breath somewhere and rasped, "My father. My father is dead."

Against the black hole left by her own grief she felt Baas' hot anger. "They will pay for the death of the Prince. They will pay dearly."

Tenel Ka barely heard. She didn't know if Jacen himself had killed her father, but she couldn't disbelieve it. For him it would have been one more crime, one more murder, just like his aunt and so many others, done without hesitation or regret.

It would have been one more way he'd found to hurt her. Even kidnapping their child had not been as awful as this.

Allana.

She straightened. "I must go to my daughter. Admiral, the battle is yours."

"Of course, Your Majesty. Guards!"

Two of Tenel Ka's bodyguards appeared at her side and began escorting her to the chamber where they'd kept Allana. Even knowing *Dragon Queen* would be heading into terrible battle, Tenel Ka hadn't hesitated to bring her daughter aboard. There was no other place the girl would be safe; between Jacen, the scheming nobles on Hapes, and now their new Imperial enemies, the girl had threats on all sides and Tenel Ka knew she'd never have peace of mind unless Allana was close by.

She had no idea if Allana had felt her grandfather's death in the Force. If she had, Tenel Ka knew there was no way she could spare her daughter that pain.

Her guards led her into a bed-chamber as well appointed as anything in the Fountain Palace. She found Allana there, sitting on the plush mattress with her bare feet dangling over the edge. Almost six years old now, she was starting to thin out and stretch out,

leaving the last bits of the little girl she'd been behind, but she was still clasping it in her lap: the plush tauntaun doll that Jacen had brought her as a gift one year ago.

Tenel Ka stopped in the doorway. Allana looked up at her mother and asked innocently, "Mama, what's wrong?"

"Leave us," Tenel Ka rasped to her guards. They obeyed without question, leaving Tenel Ka alone in the room with her daughter.

"Mama, I feel... cold." Allana hugged the tauntaun toy tighter. "I don't know why. Did something happen, Mama?"

Tenel Ka lowered herself onto the bed and wrapped her one arm around Allana's shoulders, holding the child tight against her breast.

"Mama!" the girl sounded alarmed, muffled as her voice was in Tenel Ka's clothes. "What's wrong?"

She rested her cheek against the red crown of Allana's head. "It's your grandfather, Allana. He's dead."

Allana didn't say anything, didn't cry, didn't even shake. She just clawed her little hands into Tenel Ka's clothes and pressed her face a little harder against her chest.

As she clung to her daughter and her daughter clung to her Tenel Ka's mind staggered, trying to make sense of it all, trying to reconcile the earnest teenage boy the the brandybrown eyes and messy hair and animal collection and stupid jokes with the monster who'd kidnapped the child and murdered the father of the woman he was supposed to have loved. It felt like the universe itself had twisted into some awful nightmare from which there would be waking, not for her, not for Allana, not for anyone ever again.

The cabin around them shuddered; first lightly, then heavily enough to nearly knock them off balance. It was only then that Tenel Ka pulled away from Allana and grabbed her comlink.

"Admiral Baas," she called, "Is *Dragon Queen* under attack?"

"Heavy attack, Your Majesty," Baas confirmed. "I recommend you stay in your cabin. I will send a second set of guards."

"Guards? What's happening?"

"We're facing heavy fighter and bomber attacks, and the Imperials have slipped a few missile boats past our forward line.... Hold on, Your Majesty... Please stand by..."

The comlink shut off. Still keeping it in her hand, Tenel Ka hooked her arm around Allana's shoulders and held her close again.

"Is it Jacen?" the girl whimpered. "Is he coming to kill us too?"

The poor child was deathly afraid of her father; she always would be now. In the scale of Jacen's crimes, Allana's trauma was so minor but it still broke Tenel Ka's heart. "No, Allana. It's the Imperials. But don't worry, we'll be safe here. I promise."

"But Jacen..."

"He's not here." She kissed the tip of Allana's head and tried to send comfort through the Force that she couldn't feel herself.

"Then where *is* he?"

On *Anakin Solo*, no doubt. Jaina had managed to board the star destroyer. One sole Jedi against a whole star destroyer and a Sith Lord. If it were anyone *but* Jaina they wouldn't stand a chance.

Despite everything, the thought of Jaina's success only filled Tenel Ka with deeper dread.

Admiral Baas started speaking through the comlink again, saying, "Your Majesty, the Imperials have managed to land one assault shuttle in our main hangar bay."

"*What?*"

"I'm sorry, but they broke through our defenses. We have ground teams in the hangar blockading all exits. Their boarding party is outnumbered ten to one, Your Majesty. I assure you they will *not* get through."

"See to it they don't, Admiral."

"I will. Please remain where you are, Your Majesty."

The comlink shut off again and Tenel Ka held her daughter tighter. In her muffled voice Allana asked, "Are we really safe?"

"The Imperials will not get to us here. We're safe," she said, but even then she found it hard to believe. Despite all her grief, she knew they *should* be safe in this cabin; it was located on the secure zone directly beneath the bridge in the upper saucer, while *Dragon Queen's* hangar bays were located in the lower saucer. It would be nigh impossible for an Imperial boarding party to traverse the entire height of the ship just to attack them.

In fact, it made her wonder why the Imperials were even trying that tactic at all.

She turned the comlink back on and called, "Admiral Baas, are you there?"

"We're here, Majesty. Rest assured, that landing team is confined to the hangar bay."

"Admiral, what about the other Imperial ships? Are they attacking?"

"They appear to be falling back, though their fighters are still engaged with ours. Do you suggest we—"

Suddenly it overwhelmed her: a voice screaming inside her mind. Tenel Ka dropped the comlink and

nearly dropped Allana as she pressed her hand to her temple, gasping for breath, trying to get it out of her head, to get *him* out of her head.

Jacen. She heard Allana give a pained moan and knew he was trying to connect with both of them and tell them something.

And it felt like *Jacen*, not Darth Caedus, the monster he'd become. She could feel honest naked concern barely hidden beneath the sheer *panic* in his thoughts as he screamed at her, screamed at them both, saying-

-go now save Allana save her save her Imperials have nanovirus kill you both nanovirus in the air keep Allana safe save her save her save her-

Even as her mind rattled with Jacen's frantic message she fumbled for the comlink and plucked it from the bedsheets.

"Admiral!" she called, "The Imperials! They're pumping a nanovirus into the atmosphere! You must sever all climate systems from the bottom saucer immediately! Vent the hangar to the vacuum if you have to! And shut down all air coming into this chamber!"

"Your Majesty? How do you *know* this?"

"Do it, Admiral! Do it now or the Imperial will kill us all-"

Suddenly the screaming stopped. Silence exploded in her mind. She dropped the comlink again and pulled Allana tight against her as the child started screaming.

"It's all right, Allana," Tenel Ka said, voice cracking. "You're safe now. Don't cry. Your father-" She forced herself to say the awful words: "Jacen is dead. You're safe now."

She lowered her head as tears ran freely down her face and Allana continued to wail.

PART I
DAMAGES

CHAPTER 1

Tahiri had started dreaming again, vivid dreams that stayed with her after she woke. They were always bad dreams, just like they'd been in the bad old days in the late stages of the Yuuzhan Vong War, after Anakin had died and the suppressed memories of Riina Kwaad had begun to struggle for emergence. Back then, so many of her dreams had involved her being back aboard the worldship at Myrkr, where everything had changed forever. Sometimes she'd dreamed that she was wandering alone through the Vong-formed environments inside the old worldship; other times she'd been sure she was being chased.

Those dreams had gone away after she'd accepted Riina Kwaad as part of herself, her Yuuzhan Vong half, but now, over ten years later, they'd come back again. And it was all because of Jacen.

When he'd offered to take her back in time with the strange Aing-Tii Force technique called Flow-walking, she'd been skeptical. The Jacen she'd known during the Yuuzhan Vong War, the one who'd once told her she'd always be family, was already gone. The Jacen who'd come back from his five-year journey to learn about different Force techniques was more coldly pragmatic, more serious and determined, more manip-

ulative. She'd known there was an ulterior motive behind his offer to take her back to Myrkr, but she'd given in any way, because after more than ten years, some wounds still hadn't healed.

And so he'd taken her all the way back to Myrkr itself. The planet, always lightly-populated with sentient life, was now abandoned, its surface partially reformed by Yuuzhan Vong life. The giant worldship, which Jacen told her was called *Baanu Rass*, hung derelict in orbit over the green planet. It had been an old worldship fifteen years ago, which was why it had been converted into a shapers' testing ground in the first place; after the Yuuzhan Vong had all moved to the living planet Zonama Sekot at the war's end, *Baanu Rass*' hull had shattered, leaving much of its insides exposed to the vacuum. Jacen had led her inside, and together they'd retraced their steps to the places they'd gone through over a decade ago and using the Force skills he'd gained from the Aing-Tii, he'd taken her back in time to see Anakin again, and it had been more real than she'd imagined.

Like any addict, she'd told herself she could do it once, just the first time, and never do it again. But of course Jacen, or Caedus, or whatever he was in the end, hadn't let her do that. He'd kept dragging her back and she'd kept letting him, because his Flow-walking meant she could see Anakin in the flesh again, Anakin from over a decade back, and she, invisibly touching the flow of events, could push her decade-younger self into doing what she should have all those years ago.

In watching her younger self, she'd almost been able to feel Anakin's touch and warmth, more vivid than any memory could provide.

She could give him that kiss at Myrkr over and over and over again, that kiss she'd promised to give him

when he came back but never could. The fact that she'd never been able to fulfill that promise had gnawed at her for years, but through Flow-walking, through Jacen and Caedus, she'd been able to think she'd kept that promise after all.

But of course it was all a lie.

Jacen and Anakin were both gone now, but Myrkr was still with her. In her dreams she sometimes found herself wandering through dense grashals, listening to sounds of distant battle- the thrumm of lightsabers, the war-cries of Yuuzhan Vong soldiers, the explosive burst of detonating thud-bugs- but no matter how hard she tried to find the source of the battle she never could.

Other times she wandered along through swamps, across dusty ridges, through dark catacombs, chasing the sound of a voice she thought was Anakin's but could never be sure. All too often, she found herself chased by voxyn, the hideous hybrids created by melding Myrkr's native vornskyr with Yuuzhan Vong fero xyn, creating hideous Force-sensitive Jedi-hunting beasts with massive acid-dripping jaws, tails like whips, and eight sets of claws that could tear a spaceship's hull apart.

Once she'd even been a Yuuzhan Vong herself, wielding an amphistaff and battling Jedi with green and blue and gold blades whose faces were somehow always obscured by shadow.

The voxyn dreams were the worst, so of course they came the most often. In one dream (she knew it was a dream but that changed nothing) she found herself running through some artificial town that should have been full of human and Bothan and Gotal slaves but wasn't. The voxyn was after her and she had to climb up some ladder and kicked the ladder down right in the face of the monster as it tried to jump up onto the

rooftop after her. As the voxyn howled hungrily beneath she heard a voice, a voice that must have been Anakin's, telling her to follow.

Somehow, she knew the direction from which the voice came, and she followed. She jumped from rooftop to rooftop, the voxyn swiping at her heels all the while. She climbed up to higher storeys and slipped inside broken windows and crawled through the dusty innards of the abandoned town, the voxyn always howling outside and Anakin always urging her on until she finally found a hole that led deep into the ground.

She threw herself in. Suddenly the voxyn was right behind her; its long snout stuck through the hole and snapping at her, acid dripping from double-rows of serrated teeth, but the beast could not fit its whole body through.

She stared up at the voxyn's jaws in fear until suddenly two hands took her shoulders and pulled her deeper into the dark. Suddenly she was in some low cavern, as tight as that locker in the space station where she and Anakin had kissed for the first time, and now it was Anakin again, she could feel it and know it even without seeing him or hearing his voice.

"Thank you so much, Anakin," she found herself babbling as she reached in the dark until her fingers touched the smooth lines of his face, still remembered so vividly after so many years.

"It's all right, Tahiri. You're safe now." It was like he was whispering in both ears.

"Oh, Anakin, I'm so sorry," she panted.

"Sorry for what?"

For everything. For letting him die, for being pathetic and weak, for letting herself fall into despair once he was gone, for letting Jacen trick her, for killing Gilad Pellaeon and Lon Shevu, for capturing Prince Isolder

so Jacen could murder him, for betraying everyone she'd ever known and despoiling everything she'd ever loved just because of her desperate *need* to get back to the past.

Because it was Anakin (because it was all a dream) he didn't have to hear her say it. He stroked her cheek with a warm, rough hand and said, "It's all right, Tahiri. You don't have to worry ever again. You'll be safe here."

"Oh, Anakin," she felt cold tears in her eyes, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I just couldn't forget you, Anakin. I couldn't... I couldn't...."

Words choked in her throat. Anakin stroked her face again and gently whispered in both ears, "It's all right, Tahiri. I still love you."

"I don't deserve it."

"Shh, Tahiri, don't cry."

She felt his breath on her face, smelled the scent she could never forget. She felt warm lips on hers and opened her mouth to take him all in. She closed her eyes even though it was pitch-black and savored it, lost herself in it, indulged herself in this dream just like as he'd indulged in Jacen's flow-walking delusions because delusion and dreams were all she'd ever have any more.

An eternity of dream-time later the kiss finally ended and she cracked open her eyes. Suddenly there was light again, coming from she knew not where, light that illuminated the rough cheek of the face in front of her; the tight cold lips, the fringe of dark shaggy hair, the sunken yellow eyes-

She jerked back but Jacen grabbed her chin and held her in a tight black-gloved grip. Sneering, breath pulsing in her face, he said, "Don't cry, Tahiri," and he spoke with his voice- the voice of Darth Caedus- but

she heard Anakin's too. It was like either brother was whispering into either ear and she watched Caedus' twisted lips say again, "Don't cry, Tahiri," and heard Anakin say it too.

"Let me go," she tried to say, "Let me go!"

"You will always be family to us," Caedus said, and she heard his bitter mockery and she heard Anakin's comforting caress.

Finally, she woke up.

She stared at the ceiling of her cell, the same ceiling she'd woken up to after all the other bad dreams for the past week. Her sheets hadn't been changed in all that time and she'd stopped almost noticing the reek of the sweat-damp cloth.

Almost.

She sat upright, stretched, and tried to think about something besides her latest dream, even though this cell was just permacrete walls on all sides and there was nothing to distract her.

She took off her sweaty, smelly clothes and tried doing exercises on the cold hard floor. It was something. It gave her a way to focus her restless energy, anyway.

Her cell lay deep beneath the Fountain Palace on Hapes. She was being treated as a Galactic Alliance prisoner of war, and her fate was to be decided by the Hapans, which she supposed she was glad for; it was far better than being a prisoner of the Imperial Remnant, especially after what she'd done to their Commander in Chief.

What she'd done for Jacen. For Anakin. For herself. She didn't even know any more. The simple fact was that she'd murdered an unarmed ninety-year-old man.

Her crimes against the Hapans were much less reprehensible in comparison.

She'd done everything she could to comply with her captors. She'd told them everything about Caedus' battle plans and security arrangements, though how much good that would do she didn't know, since *Anakin Solo* had been battered beyond repair during the last battle and Caedus was dead.

She knew nothing about the state of the fighting otherwise. She hadn't seen Ben Skywalker, to whom she'd surrendered, or any other familiar face since her capture. In a way that was easier; she was confessing only to strangers and didn't have to bow her head in shame before men and women who'd once trusted her as family.

She'd completed her exercises and put her bad-smelling but dry clothes on when there was a knock on the door. They weren't asking for her permission to enter, of course. They always came in ten seconds after knocking; they were just giving her the courtesy of a warning.

Two grey-uniformed Hapan guardswomen stepped inside. They looked down on her with aristocratic Hapan disdain as she remained seated on her bunk, bare feet brushing the hard floor.

"Well?" Tahiri asked eventually. "What is it this time? Have you picked my punishment yet?"

"Your fate has been decided," a voice said from outside. Tahiri knew that voice. On instinct, she jumped to her feet. Cold shot up her body but she kept herself still and her face blank as Queen Mother Tenel Ka walked into the cell.

"Your Majesty," Tahiri swallowed, and snapped a bow.

Tenel Ka had been a few years older than her at the Jedi Academy and she'd always found the stoic red-haired warrior woman-slash-Hapan queen more than a

little intimidating. Right now, all she could remember was the look of fury on Tenel Ka's normally controlled face when she found Tahiri battling Leia Organa Solo in the Fountain Palace when Tahiri had attempted to arrest her on Darth Caedus' orders.

"At ease, Miss Veila," Tenel Ka said. *Miss Veila*. Not Lieutenant Colonel Veila, the rank Jacen had given her when she'd joined his Galactic Alliance Guard. Not Jedi Veila either. And certainly not *Tahiri*.

Tahiri nodded but didn't relax. She swallowed and asked, "What is my sentence?"

Tenel Ka regarded her for three long heartbeats before she said, "You have been sentenced to live, Miss Veila. In light of your cooperation with our investigators, and the cessation of hostilities, you are to be released."

"Cessation? You mean the war's over?"

"Indeed. Without... the Chief of State, the Galactic Alliance military quickly sued for peace."

So they weren't going to say his name, then, Jacen or Caedus. Good. Tahiri preferred it that way. "I'm glad for that. I can't tell you how glad."

"Indeed. However, I've received notification from the Alliance that the GAG rank you'd been assigned is no longer viable."

"You mean I've been dishonorably discharged?"

"I believe so. I should also note that the Imperial Remnant has requested that you be extradited for the murder of Grand Admiral Pellaeon."

Tahiri swallowed. "And?"

"I will be doing the Remnant no favors."

"I understand. I... I was aboard *Anakin Solo* when... When *he* learned about the nanovirus the Remnant was planning to use. He was determined to do everything he could to stop it."

“He did,” Tenel Ka said, voice shaking for the first time.

Tahiri hesitated, unsure of what next to ask. There were so many questions about the state of the galaxy now that the war was ended, not to mention the state of the Jedi and the Solo family. She wasn’t sure how much she wanted to know right now. She wasn’t sure how much of it even mattered any more.

She settled with the most practical. “When am I to be released?”

“Not until tomorrow, Miss Veila. There are still some affairs that need to be processed.”

“Of course. I’m... I’m in no rush.”

The queen nodded. “Very well. If you’ll excuse me, I have a ceremony to attend. I only wanted to deliver the news to you personally.”

“I appreciate that, Your Majesty. But... what ceremony?”

“A funeral,” she said. “For my father. And my daughter.”

Tahiri stared. She’d known about the Imperial plan to attack the Hapan royal bloodline. She had no idea the attack had been partially successful.

A new heaviness settled over her. She’d almost-*almost-* gotten used to being responsible for the deaths of Pellaeon and Shevu. But this was different. *She’d* been the one to engineer the capture of Isolder, thus making possible both his death and the creation of the nanovirus. She’d done it because Isolder would be a valuable hostage that might force a cease-fire with the Hapans. She’d never imagined it could end with all those deaths.

She told herself that, and immediately recognized it for a lie. She’d known what a monster Caedus was then, that he was capable even of murdering an unarmed

hostage. She'd done it to impress him, to earn a little of his favor and his Flow-walking. What's more, she'd done it to impress herself, because she'd known she'd already turned her back on the Jedi and had at least been trying to be good at *something*, even if that something was as awful as being a Sith.

It was shocking how easy it had been to let go of the old rules, to justify things, to look the other way when her conscience or better judgment nagged at her.

Tahiri couldn't bring herself to say she was sorry. *Sorry* didn't even start to cover it.

Instead Tenel Ka gave her a tiny nod, turned, and walked out of the cell. Her guards followed behind her and they closed the door, locking it tight, leaving Tahiri alone once more with the weight of all she'd done.

CHAPTER 2

Tenel Ka stood at the fore of the arena and looked out the crowds gathered for her father's funeral. It was the largest place of convocation in the Fountain Palace complex, and it was filled to bursting with the full rank of Hapan nobility who'd gathered to pay Isolder his due respects. Per Tenel Ka's request, the ceremony was also open to all commoners, just as it had been to commemorate the death of her mother during the Yuuzhan Vong War. She was impressed and humbled by the thousands more who had come to pay respects, inside the arena and in large crowds gathered outside.

They'd spent the past day filing down the long line leading to the two coffins placed before the speaker's platform. One was long, the other small, and both were closed. Mourners had been passing by all day to touch each coffin and pay respects to Prince Isolder in the large one, and, so they thought, the remains of the Hapan heir, Chume'da Allana Djo, in the other.

There were still too many uncertainties, too many loose ends to be investigated. The Imperial attack on *Dragon Queen* had succeeded in killing a number of their crew with its nanovirus, and for her daughter's safety, Tenel Ka had agreed to let her be raised by her grandparents while she tried to find out which Hapan

nobles had helped the Imperials in their murderous schemes. It broke her heart to have to give Allana away, but she knew it was the best way to keep the girl safe.

It was impossible to make out faces in the throng, so instead he looked to one side, then the other, at the people arrayed on the speakers' platform. To her right were high-ranking Hapan nobles and military officers like Admiral Baas and Major Espara. To her left were the people whose presence actually gave her some strength right now: Master Skywalker and his son, Han and Leia Solo, their daughter Jaina, and the dark-haired six-year-old girl who, to all the galaxy save a select few, was a Hapan war orphan named Amelia that they'd adopted to salve the wound in their hearts left by their son's death. Tenel Ka knew many of the nobles would grumble bitterly about having four Jedi in places of honor, but right now she didn't care.

A short series of speakers each came to the stand and gave brief eulogies. Astarta, her father's long-time bodyguard and close friend, recounted the time in his youth when he'd joined one of the pirate fleets that lurked in the Transitory Mists, hiding his identity and risking everything to find those who had killed his elder brother, so that justice might be done. Justice, Astarta said, had always been Isolder's watchword, and he'd never deviated from it his entire life.

Next came Leia Organa Solo. Since the death of her elder son, she'd radiating an almost unbearable *weight* in the Force. It carried over to her eyes as she looked out at the crowd and in her voice as she began speaking of a brave man who'd once sought her hand in marriage. Her husband showed no discomfort at all when she said she'd almost taken Isolder's office, so impressed was she by the man's innate *goodness*. In the end, he'd proven that goodness by defying his

mother and Hapan tradition by marrying a foreign woman, a half-civilized witch from Dathomir no less, for the simple fact that he loved her.

Leia Organa Solo said that she'd been proud to know Isolder, and Tenel Ka watched from the corner of her eye as her husband nodded in quiet, solemn agreement.

Then it was Tenel Ka's turn. She'd prepared a speech for the event but as she looked out at countless expectant faces she struggled to remember the right words.

Finally they came to her. She said, "We have come here today to memorialize two great losses. One represents the past. The other is the future. In losing my father, a great man whose virtues you've already heard extolled, we Hapans have lost the best parts of ourselves: not just beauty and grace and wealth, but honor and dignity, those lofty ideals we so often mouth fealty toward but rarely live out.

"In losing my daughter and heir, Allana, we've lost even more. We've lost a chance to become a new society, a *better* society."

Her voice wavered; it seemed surreal to eulogize her own child when Allana was really sitting alive and well a moment away, but she pressed on, focusing on the truth behind her words.

She found her honest anger as she said, "My daughter was targeted for deliberate murder. That heinous act claimed not only her life, but the lives of hundreds aboard the *Dragon Queen*. The act was an abomination against all civilized law and it will not go unpunished.

"That we, as Hapans, have even allowed such a tragedy to occur speaks ill of us all. For Allana's sake, and the sake of every daughter and sister we've lost in the recent battle, we must all do better. I, as your

Queen, promise I will do better. For my child, and all our children.”

She stepped away from the podium and sat down. A few more speakers, including Admiral Baas, finished the ceremony, and Tenel Ka remained seated on her pearly throne as she watched the mourners slowly begin to file out.

Once she was sure all attention was no longer focused on her, she dared to look beside her at the Skywalkers and Solos all in a line, their expressions uniformly somber. Jaina was sitting the closest to her; the dark-haired woman had her arms crossed over her chest and was staring outward into nothing. Her expression was stern and slim bacta-patches marked spots on her forehead, cheekbone, and neck where wounds were still healing after her fight to the death with her brother.

Tenel Ka and Jaina had barely spoken since then. It seemed impossible to find the right words, and Tenel Ka struggled to say something, anything, now.

Finally, she managed, “Thank you for coming, friend Jaina.”

The other woman nodded, very slightly, but didn’t respond.

Under her breath, Tenel Ka continued, “I know that your parents and... Amelia plan to leave soon. Will you be going with them, or will you be going with the Skywalkers?”

Luke and Ben were going to Shedu Maad, which Tenel Ka had permitted to remain as the Jedi’s secret training ground in the Transitory Mists. Even though she was sure no one could hear her speak with Jaina, she kept from mentioning it in case some Baldavian lip-readers were hiding somewhere in the exiting crowd.

For a long moment it seemed like Jaina would ignore her entirely. Finally, she said, "I was going to try searching one more time for Zekk."

"I understand," Tenel Ka nodded.

In the wake of the battle, clean-up crews had scoured the Throat and all the starship wreckage littered there for Zekk's body. They'd found other dead but not him. The only clue was pieces of several wrecked StealthX fighters, but even then it was impossible to tell where he was. It was as though he had simply vanished, and losing him was almost as bad as losing her father and Jacen, in some ways it was worse, because they might never know Zekk's fate for certain.

Jaina dragged in a deep, deep breath and turned to fully face Tenel Ka. She leaned in close so dark hair fell in curtains on either side of her face.

Tenel Ka leaned closer too a raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "What is it, friend Jaina?"

"I've been talking with my parents," she said. "There's something... we want to do."

"What?"

She took another deep breath, in and out. "We recovered his body from the *Anakin Solo*. It's still... intact, mostly."

His body. They weren't going to say his name. To Tenel Ka that was a relief; she didn't even know if she should call him *Caedus* or *Jacen*. She didn't know which would hurt her less.

"We've been keeping it frozen on Uroto Station," Jaina continued, "But Mom and Dad loaded it into the *Falcon* before coming here. They think... They think they want to finish it here."

"Here? On Hapes?"

Jaina nodded slightly. "It's where we burned Anakin's body, remember? I think... Well, I think it

would be appropriate, somehow. Sending them off in the same place.”

Tenel Ka’s uncertainty must have shown on her face. Jaina quickly added, “You don’t have to come if you don’t want to. But still... I think we’d like to do it tonight. Quietly. Privately.”

Tenel Ka closed her eyes and allowed a faint shudder to run through her body. “This will be very... difficult for me.”

“It will be hard for all of us.”

Tenel Ka’s mind flashed back through the years, to the night where they’d Anakin’s body and watched his flames leap toward the stars. She wasn’t sure how she felt about burning Jacen’s body the same way. He simply didn’t deserve the send-off his brother had received; instead of dying a hero he’d died a monster and that fact pained her to the core.

And yet she knew that if she didn’t come, she’d regret it for the rest of her life. Maybe, just maybe, it would even give her some small sense of closure.

“I’ll do it,” Tenel Ka opened her eyes and looked into Jaina’s. “But I have one question. Will your parents bring Allana?”

“You’re her mother. They wanted you to decide.”

Tenel Ka simple didn’t know which was the right decision. On one level she suspected seeing Jacen’s body disappear in the flames might calm Allana’s fear of her father; alternatively, it could emblazon them forever in her heart.

“Are Ben and Master Skywalker attending as well?” she asked.

Jaina nodded. “They’re family.”

“Then so is Allana.” Tenel Ka swallowed down tears. “We will be there for you.”

CHAPTER 3

When Tahiri's cell door opened again, she was taken by surprise. She'd been expecting more scowling gray-clothed guards or maybe even the queen again, but instead she found herself looking up at a teenage boy in a brown woven Jedi robes. His red hair was messy, his eyes very tired, and he had a lightsaber hooked to his belt.

Softly, Tahiri said, "I'm surprised they let you take that in here."

Ben Skywalker realized her meaning after a second. He put a hand on his weapon and said, "They trust me. Strange as that is."

"I can't think of someone who wouldn't trust you," Tahiri said. She'd meant it to sound warm and joking, then immediately remembered Jacen. She lowered her head, avoiding his eyes, and said, "They'll let me go free. That's what they said."

"That was Tenel Ka's decision."

She couldn't tell if he approved. "What about Master Skywalker?"

"We've talked about it. He thinks you've already taken steps to redeem yourself. He says that if you want to rejoin the Jedi Order, he's willing to talk to you about it."

She shook her head. "I'm no Jedi, Ben."

"You used to be."

"Maybe. I'm not even sure any more. I was a Sith until about a week ago."

"You were never Sith. You were just one of his pawns, a tool he was using—"

"Don't, Ben." She looked up again. "I'm not just another one of his victims. I killed people, Ben. I *murdered* them."

"I know," he said, blue eyes gone cold.

Of course he knew. He'd been strapped to a table and watched as she'd pumped Force lightning into Lon Shevu, his GAG friend and mentor, lightning that had overloaded the circuits of the beaten man's medical system and stopped his heart. She hadn't even *meant* to kill him, not like Pellaeon. It had simply happened; she'd let it happen. It was still her fault and Ben had to know that. The fact that he was willing to help her now, after what she'd done to him, was more mercy than she deserved.

"Tahiri, you're not him. There was a point where he did what you did, killed a prisoner by accident. I was there. I saw him afterward. He was horrified at himself... but he *kept going*. You're not like him. You knew your limits. You knew when you couldn't do that evil any more."

She wanted to believe it; it might even have been true. She sniffed, "That doesn't erase what I've done."

"I know. But we're still willing to help you."

She wiped a little wetness from her eyes. "I may not be Sith, but I'm not a Jedi anymore, Ben. Just like I used to be a Tusken and a Yuuzhan Vong, but I'm not those anymore either."

"Then what are you?" he asked, voice soft and curious.

She didn't know. She simply didn't. She looked down at her hands without answer.

"You can be what you want to be now, Tahiri. You only have to decide, to—"

"To chose and act? That's the sort of thing *he* would say."

"Fair enough," Ben admitted, "But that's not wrong in itself. What *are* you going to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe... Maybe I will come back to the Order someday, but I can't do it now." In her heart, she knew that day would never come. She'd only said it to appease him. Maybe he knew that, maybe not. She added, very weakly, "I'm sorry, Ben. I really am."

"It's all right. I understand."

Tahiri gave a long, tired sigh. "Is that why you came down here, Ben? To offer me an out?"

"Partially. I also wanted to let you know that you're invited."

"Invited to what?" she frowned.

"Tonight. We're... burning his body."

His body. *Jacen's* body.

And he was asking her to come.

"You're doing it here, on Hapes?"

Ben nodded. "Like they did for Anakin, I guess, not that I remember that. Like it, but smaller. Dad and I are going. So's Jaina, Uncle Han and Aunt Leia. So's Tenel Ka."

She closed her eyes and could almost see Anakin on his pyre half a lifetime ago, surrounded by those whose lives he'd saved.

"Family," Tahiri said. "Only family."

"Pretty much," Ben said, faint as a whisper.

You will always be family to us.

Jacen had said that, back when he was unmistakably Jacen, back when she'd needed him and needed his

family. And it was part of the reason why, ten years later, she'd let him drag her into the dark.

"I can't do it, Ben." She shook her head. "I'm not family."

"I talked to Dad and Jaina. They said they'd be okay with it."

Jaina. Tahiri felt something like bile in the back of her throat. All the awful things she'd gone through over the past months must have been nothing compared to what Jaina had. She didn't know how she'd be able to look the other woman in the eye.

Any of them in the eye.

"I'm sorry, Ben. I appreciate that, I do. But I can't go. I'm not family. I'm nobody's family."

After a long, hesitating pause, Ben said, "I understand."

"Thank you."

He stepped back into the doorway. "Goodbye, Tahiri. I hope I see you again some day."

"Goodbye, Ben."

He nodded, turned, and let. The door closed behind her. She collapsed back on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. She started to wonder when the dreams would come again.

CHAPTER 4

From the peak of the mountain the stars seemed close enough to touch. Faintly backlit by the glow of the Transitory Mists, the stars filled the night sky's dome in all directions. When he looked down, Tenel Ka could see the lights of Fountain Palace in the far distance, but the land around them was totally empty and dark.

A few torches, burning atop pikes stuck in the ground, provided the only illumination for those gathered around the pyre. Tenel Ka stood with Allana pressed against her side. Leia had her arm linked to Han Solo's and Luke Skywalker stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Ben stood at Jacen's feet with his hands stuffed in his pockets, looking at the body faintly visible in the dark.

Lastly there was Jaina. She stood right beside the corpse, close enough to bend over a plant a kiss on her brother's head. She didn't. Tenel Ka's mind flashed back to Anakin Solo's funeral on this same mountaintop all those years ago. Jaina had been delivered by Kyp Durrone from the ball hosted by Tenel Ka's grandmother, Jedi robes hastily thrown on after changing out of the tight gown Ta'a Chume had provided. Now she wore a plain black tunic and jacket; her hair was pulled

out of her face into a braid down her back and the flickering torchlight highlighted the white bandages on her forehead and made her whole face look narrow, gaunt.

Last time they'd also been surrounded by all the survivors of the Myrkr mission, and others who wanted to pay their respects. They'd taken turns and spoken of all the different ways Anakin Solo had saved their lives.

They could, in theory, have done the same about Jacen, but far more vivid now were the scars left by the man who'd become Caedus. They could go in circles forever, probably, listing the pain he'd caused them in the end, pain that now eclipsed all the good he'd done and probably always would.

As she allowed herself to look at the body of the man she'd loved Tenel Ka allowed herself the hope that, through fire, they could expunge some of those bad memories and perhaps even give back life to some of the good ones. She knew it could never be, but she still hoped.

Jacen's face looked gaunt like his sister's in the torchlight; gaunt, but somehow peaceful. Her mind flashed back to the times when she'd laid in bed beside him, watching his sleeping face, so different from his waking one. Waking Jacen, in all his forms, had been alert, inquisitive, restless. There had always been a spark in his brandybrown eyes, and so often his forehead had been creased and lips pressed tight in contemplation of one great matter or another. Sleep had always made Jacen look younger.

He didn't look younger now. The awful things he'd done, the dark powers he'd used and that had used him, seemed to have carved away the last softness from his face, leaving something carved, angular, harsh. But of course it would; in becoming Caedus he'd purged

himself of all his old softness. Not even death could erase that stain.

They stood around the body for what seemed like forever before Jaina, finally, went over to one of the pikes and picked up the torch. She walked back to Jacen's body and held it high so the light shone over her, over him, over everyone gathered.

She paused, like she was waiting for someone to say something, but no one did.

No one had the words.

Tenel Ka watched as Jaina glanced toward her parents. Leia nodded, almost imperceptibly. Han gave no motion at all.

Jaina dropped the torch. Flame leaped up at once. Tenel Ka felt her daughter's hands claw into her leg as they watched the fire spread around Jacen's body. She reached out with the Force and tried to send wordless comfort to Allana; to tell her that Jacen was gone, that he could never harm her, that she was safe among family forever more and that she never needed to worry ever again.

She wanted to send comfort, but Allana pressed her head against Tenel Ka's thigh and began to cry. Her tears could barely be heard over the crackle of flame, but Tenel Ka was sure everyone else noticed them too.

Tenel Ka had never cried as a child. She'd never allowed herself to. She'd always tried to fashion herself into a hard, stoic warrior, like she'd thought had been her birthright. She could see now that, as a result, she'd never learned to trust her own feelings and had instead allowed them to well up inside her until they became a cancer, one she never allowed anyone else to notice, not even the people she should have shared those feelings with. People like Jaina, like Zekk now gone, like Jacen burning in front of her.

Perhaps, if she'd learned better as a child, it could have all been different.

She reached down and gently stroked Allana's hair. It was better this way, she hoped. Allana could purge herself of what her father had been and, in the loving care of her grandparents, grow stronger and freer and truer to herself than her mother had.

Tenel Ka had to believe that. It was the only thing she had left.

She tilted her head back and watched the flames leap and flicker and dissolve into cool night wind, leaving only the distant pinpoints of stars.

CHAPTER 5

When Zekk woke up he found himself floating in bacta. He recognized the liquid soft caress against his skin and the smell picked up through his ventilator mask even as he bobbed in the glass tube. Through its curved face he could sometimes make out figures shifting in the white-walled room beyond. One he could tell was a medical droid from its silver body and spindly limbs, but other times he was sure he saw humanoid figures beyond the glass.

Through his semi-conscious haze he could reach into the Force and sense emotions from them, mostly a vague and slightly detached curiosity. Whatever that meant, he had no idea, but as time went by and he passed again and again from waking to sleep and back again, never encountering a familiar presence, he came to understand that he was not among friends.

He had no idea how much time had passed since the battle at the Throat. He had no idea whether Jaina was still alive, or Jacen, or anyone else he'd ever known. He tried to reach out with the Force but felt nothing; perhaps they were gone, perhaps he was too far away physically. Perhaps all his senses were simply addled from his injuries. He remembered, at least, how he'd gone spiraling out of his starfighter after that attack run

on *Anakin Solo*. The successful attack run. Everything to have come after that was an incomprehensible haze.

He passed in and out of sleep until finally, after some interminable time, the medical droid began to drain the bacta from his tank. He'd been in tanks before and he knew what came next. He'd been in the warm liquid, near-naked, for days, and his entire body began to shudder with chills. The droid's hard mechanical vice-grip took him by the shoulders and led him from the tank; he spread his legs wide to keep from slipping on the smooth floor and accepted the white towel from the droid.

He surveyed his surroundings. He and the droid were alone in what seemed to be the well-appointed medical bay of a spaceship; he could feel the vibration of distant engines, but he heard no sound, which might have meant they were in hyperspace. He was sure he'd seen beings outside his tank, but right now, for his long-awaited emergence, the only thing in the room besides him was the droid.

"Where am I?" he asked. "What ship is this?"

The light in the droid's photoreceptors still glowed, but it made no sound. Zekk knew medical droids like this *could* speak, but this one, apparently, had been ordered to stay silent.

He definitely had a bad feeling about this.

"Can I at least put some clothes on?" he asked, tightening the towel around his waist. The droid made no sound, but it extended one thin arm to point to a reached on the far side of the room where some white clothes seemed to have been folded.

Zekk nodded and went across the room. It was simple enough: a plain jumpsuit with a few pockets and nothing else. It occurred to him to wonder for the first time what had happened to his flight suit, or for

that matter his lightsaber. The realization made him feel even more vulnerable.

He looked around the room for security holo-cams. He spotted one spherical bug-eye above the bacta tank and scowled at it; he was sure somebody must have been watching him.

Yet at the moment, because he was still addled or cranky or both, he found he didn't care about the holo-cam. Whoever was watching him would make their presence known whenever they damned well pleased, and if they wanted him to put on a show, so be it. He threw the towel away and began changing into the jumpsuit.

Zekk was a big man, lean and tall and wide-shouldered, but this jumpsuit, at least, seemed to fit him. He'd just finished sealing it, all the way up to his neck, when he heard the door swish open behind him.

He turned around, pulling strands of long wet black hair from his eyes, and stared at the newcomer. The creature standing next to the medical droid was at least twice Zekk's side, just as tall but far wider. Baragwin, with their high humped backs, thick necks and beady faces, were a common sight in spacelanes throughout the galaxy. People often took them as slow-witted thanks to their lumbering bodies and homely faces but Zekk knew they were as canny as any beings to be found in the spacelanes. As far as he knew, there were none among the Jedi and there certainly weren't any among the Hapans or Imperial forces.

"You seem well," the Baragwin observed in accentless Basic.

"The bacta did the trick," Zekk said, and it was true. As he'd put his clothes on he'd noticed multiply patches of pink tissue denoting mending scars and healing bruises, but that was all.

The Baragwin shuffled a few steps closer. "That's good. How is your right arm?"

Zek glanced at it. It seemed as normal as anything else on him; he flexed it, twisted it, and asked, "What happened to it?"

"It was broken. We set it in a splint. It seems to have mended excellently. Our droid does excellent work, doesn't he?"

Zekk glanced at the mute metal facemask behind the Baragwin. "He does. Did you program him not to speak with me?"

"Yes, actually," the Baragwin said casually. "I wanted to have the first chance to talk."

"Did you now?" Zekk crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm really thankful you pulled me from my ship, but I'd like to know what's going on. Are you this ship's captain?"

"First officer. Call me Chazdrul Harn."

"All right. I'd like to speak to your captain. I have a lot I need to talk about."

"Captain Praelyx will see you when he is ready. Right now, I'm to see you to your quarters."

"I don't mean to be rude, but I'd really not bother with quarters. I'd like to get off this ship as soon as I can."

"And go where?"

Zekk blinked. "I'd like to get back where I came from. I'm.... I have people who are waiting for me."

"I'm sure you do," Harn said dismissively. "We know you're a Jedi, by the way. The lightsaber was a give-away."

"My lightsaber? What did you do with it?"

"The captain has it at the moment. He's always been fascinated with Jedi."

"Well, he can talk to a real one any time he wants."

“That’s true, but right now he doesn’t want it.”

Zekk sighed and tried to keep calm. He didn’t feel like he was in immediate harm, though Baragwin were always hard to get on a read on, even with the Force. “Listen,” he said, “I have people I care about. I just want to know if they’re okay.”

Harn made a sniffing noise; it sounded like something was scraping deep inside his head. “All right, Jedi. The war is over. Jacen Solo is dead.”

Zekk felt dizzy. He had to brace himself against the nearest bulkhead. “What about his sister? What about Jaina?”

“Sister? Ah, I believe I heard it said that *she* killed him. Such an unfortunate family.”

“You don’t know the half of it”

“You do?” Harn asked, curious.

Zekk frowned. He’d said too much. “What about the other Jedi? What about the Hapans? What about-”

“All in good time.” Harn removed a small datapad from the robes that hung over his broad, hunched form. “The latest news updates. I believe they’ll provide excellent reading material while you recuperate.”

“Until your captain decides to see me, you mean.”

“Yes,” Harn sniffed again, “Until then.”

CHAPTER 6

Grief could never last forever, no matter how hard it tried. There was always something else that begged to be done.

The war might have been over but Tenel Ka still had plenty of cleaning up to oversee. Her security team was still investigating the events leading to the attack on the *Dragon Queen*. They had already taken care of Ducha Requud, who'd attempted to declare herself the new queen of Hapes during the chaos of the attack, but other aristocrats were being investigated for potential ties with the Imperial Remnant.

What really concerned Tenel Ka, however, was the search for Zekk. After already suffering so much loss it was especially painful to be trapped in limbo, not knowing whether her old friend was alive or dead. Despite Admiral Baas' restrained protests, she'd detached ships from the Hapan Home Fleet to help the Jedi search the Transitory Mists.

The search had already begun shortly after the battle's conclusion, and once Isolder was buried and Jacen Solo only ashes, the rest of the Solos and Skywalkers took up the search as well. Jaina, Ben, and Master Skywalker spent hours in their X-wings combing the debris still drifting through the Throat, while Allana,

now known to the rest of the galaxy as Amelia, joined her grandparents for her first tour through the *Millennium Falcon*. What kind of conversations she was having with her grandfather, Tenel Ka couldn't imagine, though the very thought of it brought a smile to her face.

Unfortunately, nothing made her smile about the search for Zekk. The combined manpower, technological capabilities, and Force-based prowess of the Jedi and the Home Fleet scoured the Throat for days and found no sign of Zekk. Every time she commed Jaina, the *Falcon*, or Master Skywalker for updates, she heard the same weary resignation in their voices.

The time would soon come to call an end to the search, and Tenel Ka dreaded that for another reason. Once that was done, Allana and her grandparents would leave, and the Skywalkers would go to Shedu Maad. She didn't know where Jaina planned to go yet but in the end it all came to the same thing. She would be alone in her palace, alone without friends or allies or even her daughter.

It was that crushing loneliness that had driven her to seek consolation in Jacen's arms seven years ago. His visit after such a long absence had seemed like a blessing from the Force then; looking back now, it had been the beginning of a long horrible spiral, and sometimes, just sometimes, she allowed herself to wonder what might have happened if she *hadn't* taken Jacen that night. There would have been no Allana and perhaps no Darth Caedus; just the same lonely march she'd had before.

She was in the middle of such grim thoughts when her guards reported that Master Skywalker's X-wing had landed at the Palace. Bracing herself for one last wave of bad news, Tenel Ka went out to meet him.

When she reached the landing pad, he'd already taken off his helmet, revealing a mess of blond-tinted gray hair that he was trying to comb into straightness with his fingers. Rather than wear a combat pilot's flight suit he'd kept his black Jedi robes on beneath, and when she saw him standing beneath the nose of his black X-wing Tenel Ka could not decide if she was looking at an elder sage or a scruffy farmboy. But Luke Skywalker was, if anything, a combination of both.

When he saw her approach, he didn't try to muster a smile. It made Tenel Ka's last few steps heavier, but she appreciated that he didn't try to cushion the coming blow.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," he said, "But I think it's time to consider calling off the search. We simply haven't found any clues as to what's become of Zekk."

Tenel Ka nodded. "I understand. I shall advise the Home Fleet to wind down operations."

"I'm very sorry, Your Majesty, but we tried the best we could."

"I don't doubt that, Master Skywalker. Thank you for the effort."

It took effort on her part to keep her speech rigid and formal, and she could tell that Luke wished to speak somewhere private. She volunteered, "Please follow me, Master Skywalker. We can find a place for private talk and, perhaps, refreshments. I'd very much like to show you my gratitude."

"I'd very much like to receive it, Your Majesty." He bowed with a little wry smile on his face; he knew it would do the Queen's reputation no harm for the Jedi's Grand Master to be seen showing her deference.

Yet all the games were tiring. After leading Luke through a series of marble hallways and into one of the palace's walled-off gardens, she leaned close and said

to him, "It is all right now. There is a comm jamming field all over this garden. We can speak freely."

"What a relief." His lined face finally relaxed in a smile.

She walked slowly along the dirt path, down a land shaded by arching tree-branches. "Tell me, Master Skywalker, what is it you wish to talk about?"

"I was out helping the search for Zekk," he explained, "But that wasn't *all* I was doing. I also made a stop at Uroro Station."

"I thought you'd moved all of the Jedi to Shedu Maad."

"We have. I went there to have some talks with Jagged Fel."

"Ah. Aha," Tenel Ka said simply.

At the conclusion to the battle in the Throat, when it had still been unclear to outsiders whether Tenel Ka and Allana had survived the attack on *Dragon Queen*, Master Skywalker had cornered the Imperial Moff's who'd organized the nanovirus attack and essentially forced them to recognize Jagged Fel as their new head of state. Tenel Ka had nothing against Jagged Fel, far from it, and she knew he was not responsible for the heinous attempt to kill her and Allana. Nonetheless, relations between the Imperial Remnant and the Hapes Consortium had never been worse, and Tenel Ka knew that any attempt to open official diplomatic dialogue with the Remnant would be considered misguided, weak, and possibly treasonous by many Hapans.

"Jag Fel has been launching his own investigation into the nanovirus attack," Skywalker explained. "That's included some, well, aggressive interrogations of the Moff's and their personnel."

Luke was a Jedi Master and his tone included mild reproach, but Tenel Ka did not blame Jagged Fel for

using extreme methods. The Remnant was almost as rank with deceit and scheming as Hapes, and more than once she, too, had been forced to use an iron hand to keep her domain stable.

"It seems a number of the scientists who developed the weapon have already gone into hiding," Skywalker continued. "That is to say, those who developed it further. The original genome it was based on was created by Palpatine's scientists during the last stages of the Clone Wars."

She shook her head. "This is a wretched business."

"I know. But it seems Jagged can keep the situation under control for now."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that. Send him my gratitude."

"Of course." Luke's tone was still grim, and she knew he must have had something else on his mind.

"Did he tell you more, Master Skywalker?"

"I'm afraid so. Unfortunately, this is a little more complicated. It seems one of the Moffs confessed knowledge of research into *another* bio-weapon. This one was designed to target Force-users."

A shudder ran through her body. "Another one of Palpatine's toys?"

"I'm afraid not. Apparently, this one was being designed by the Yuuzhan Vong."

"The Vong? How do the Imperials know of *that*?"

Luke's voice became hoarse. "Apparently, they learned of it from Darth Caedus."

She stopped and stared at him. "He was trying to develop a bioweapon to use against the Jedi?"

"It seems that during the late stages of the war, Caedus was working closely with Imperial scientists. He initially wanted to use a nanovirus of the type they deployed on *Dragon Queen* to go after Boba Fett."

"I heard it was used. Didn't the Imperials dump it into Mandalore's atmosphere?"

"Ensuring no one with Fett DNA can ever set foot on its surface," Luke nodded. "According to the Moff who's been cooperating, Caedus wanted scientists to find and develop this bioweapon the Vong were working on. According to him, it was being worked on by shapers but never deployed."

"Have you asked the Alliance about this? They have better intelligence resources than anyone."

Luke shook his head. "I'm still trying to get on good footing with the new Alliance government. As you know, Chief of State Daala isn't exactly friendly toward the Jedi. To be frank, I'm not even sure I want her to know this bioweapon might exist."

It was a grim place to be, with potential enemies on all sides. She asked, "What about Zonama Sekot? Are there any shapers on the planet that might know of the weapon?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think it would help anyway. From what I've heard, Caedus knew that the weapon was being developed somewhere in known space. Of course, there are still hundreds of worlds that have been Vongformed irrevocably, and dozens of warships and worldships that were abandoned when the Vong all moved to Zonama Sekot. Maybe he just told the scientists to search, or maybe he knew exactly where it was. I can't say."

"How did he even know about this weapon?" Tenel Ka couldn't bring herself to use his name, either of them.

"That's uncertain, but as you know, he did spend quite some time in their... company during the War."

"Does Fel's contact know where this weapon is being kept?"

"I'm afraid not. At least, he insists he doesn't. It could be he was just repeating a rumor in hope of clemency. There might not even *be* a bioweapon at all."

"Master Skywalker, you would not tell me this if you thought that the case."

"No. There's no guarantee this weapon exists, or that it's usable, but this has to be investigated. Naturally, the Jedi will be using their own resources—"

"And I will use my special agents to look into it as well," She nodded firmly. "Hopefully different teams working independently to the same goal will produce faster results."

"That's my hope as well. Thank you, Tenel Ka."

"It's not problem. There are still many in the Hapan court who retain their hatred of the Jedi. I know some of my nobles have already been in contact with the Imperials, and if some of *them* heard about this weapon, I'm sure they've already started searching for it."

"Jaina said the same thing. She told me to mention a scientist named Sinsor Khal. Is that familiar to you?"

Tenel Ka frowned and shook her head.

"Jaina said she had some... experience with Khal on Gallinore during the Yuuzhan Vong War. He was working for your grandmother and it sounds like he was performing some less-than-ethical experiments with Yuuzhan Vong biotech. If he's still alive, and if the Imperials enlisted Hapan help in developing the weapon, he might be someone to look into."

"I will definitely look into him. Thank you, Master Skywalker."

"It's good Allana will be with her grandparents," he said softly, "Away from all this."

"This is a fact. I will miss her, of course. But now more than ever I'm glad she'll be safe with them."

Luke put both hands on her shoulders. "I know you'll be lonely here, Tenel Ka, but you have to be strong."

"I am always strong," she said, and could hear the defensiveness in her own voice.

"Of course," Luke smiled fondly. "But even if we're not close by, the Jedi will never abandon you. Your *family* never will."

She blinked away the sudden sensation in her eyes. "Thank you, Master Skywalker. That means... a great deal."

He squeezed her shoulders and said, "You gave the Jedi help when we needed it. If you ever need help yourself, don't hesitate to call. We'll always come running."

CHAPTER 7

The sun was coming up over the Fountain Palace on Hapes, and from the landing platform it could be seen as a bright gold light low in the sky that cast vivid highlights on the white cloud-wisps overhead. It was, frankly, a beautiful sight that should have brought feelings of calm and renewal, all the more because it was the first natural light of any kind Tahiri had seen in weeks.

Instead she stared at the new day's sky and felt nothing. A Hapan shuttle sat on the dock before her, its crew making final checks as they milled around its lowered landing ramp. She would have to join them soon; though the Queen had officially absolved Tahiri of any crimes against the Consortium, it was also clear that she was not welcome on Hapes, and the shuttle was going to take her to Junction Station, a trading post that Tenel Ka had ordered constructed on the edge of the Transitory Mists. Ships from the outside were rarely allowed on Hapes or any of the other sixty-three worlds in the Consortium, but they could come and go freely on Junction. It had been Tenel Ka's attempt to open her dominion to outside trade while still retaining the privacy that Hapans had cherished for centuries.

That was all fine with Tahiri. She didn't want to spend any more time on Hapes than she already had.

Still, she couldn't look at her passage off this planet, or the beautiful sunrise, and muster any feeling at all. Her guards would cast her loose on Junction and leave her to fend for herself, and she still had no idea where she would go. The Alliance wouldn't want her, and she couldn't bring herself to beg the Jedi for forgiveness she didn't deserve. The Imperial Remnant was clearly out of the question and wherever the wandering planet Zonama Sekot had gone since she'd left almost seven years ago, there was no way the Jedi or Alliance Intelligence would trust her with its location, even though she found she wanted to go there most of all.

Well, she thought, there was always Tatooine. It would almost be poetic to end things where she started.

Ben hadn't come to talk her her since that one time in her cell. Neither had Master Skywalker or any of the Solos. She was frankly glad of that; facing them would be hard and she only wanted to slip away on Junction station and try her best to become anonymous, as hard as that might be.

She picked up her lightly-packed bags and began walking toward the shuttle. Two Hapan guards stood at the base of the landing ramp, watching her with blank expressions, though she could pick up their disdain through the Force, the same disdain she'd been feeling from everyone since her capture.

Yet even as she felt that, something else touched her awareness. She stopped a good ten meters away from the shuttle and turned around. Walking onto the landing ramp was a small woman with long dark hair blowing in the breeze. Despite her short legs she walked at a fast, determined pace. Part of Tahiri wanted to run to the shuttle and never look back, but the rest of her stayed where she was, legs planted, unable to move as Jaina Solo walked up to her.

Jaina stopped a meter away, out of arm's reach. Jaina stared at her and she stared at Jaina and it seemed like neither of them could muster anything to say.

Finally, Jaina reached down to her belt. Tahiri hadn't even noticed, but she had two lightsabers hooked there. One was the weapon Jaina had constructed on Yavin 4 all those years ago. The other was the one Tahiri had surrendered to Ben Skywalker on Uroro Station.

Jaina took the lightsaber off her belt and handed it to Tahiri, pommel-first. The blond woman stared at it.

"Are you sure you want me to have this?" she asked.

"Do you want it?" Jaina asked evenly.

"I'm not sure." Tahiri didn't raise her hand.

"It will be safer."

"I know. There's going to be a lot of people who mean me harm, and not just the Imperials. Not that I blame them."

"Tahiri, I think you should take it. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here right now."

"I'm no Jedi."

"You're not a Sith either."

"You never were. What he made you do was—"

"Stop." She reached out and grabbed the lightsaber. She had to admit it felt good in her hand. "I did what I did. I'm sick of being somebody else's victim."

She hooked her weapon onto her belt, then looked at the one still on Jaina's. She had to know, so she asked in a weak voice, "Is that what you used? Is that what you... killed him with?"

Jaina nodded. Tahiri was amazed Jaina still carried it around. Maybe she *wanted* to keep it around, to carry it burden, as a way of punishing herself.

But that was speculation. Tahiri got nothing from Jaina in the Force; she dared look into the woman's brown eyes and found them unreadable too.

"There's something else," Jaina said coolly. "A question."

"Go ahead. Ask."

"Jag's been interrogating some of the Imperials responsible for the nanovirus attack on Tenel Ka." She paused. "You know Jag's in charge of the Imperial Remnant now, right?"

"I heard." She'd also heard about the Imperial attack on *Dragon Queen* and the death of Tenel Ka's daughter. Since Tenel Ka had told her she hadn't been able to shake the guilt.

"Anyway," Jaina continued, "One of the Moffs told him that... that Caedus was also looking into a bioweapon designed by the Yuuzhan Vong to target Force-users. I wanted to know if that sounded familiar."

Tahiri frowned. She had to admit it was something Caedus *could* have done. He'd increasingly come to see the Jedi as his prime enemies, and he'd never have qualms about wiping them out. He also knew more about the Yuuzhan Vong than most humans in the galaxy- though not as much as Tahiri, and that didn't sound familiar to her either.

"I never heard of him looking for a Yuuzhan Vong bioweapon," she said, hugging herself tightly, "Though I definitely wouldn't be past them to make one, or him to use it."

"You're sure? Nothing he said indicated he might be working on one with Imperial scientists? Try to remember."

She decided Jaina was doubting her memory and not her intentions, and with reluctance she dipped her mind back to those awful final days before Caedus' death. He'd become maimed and increasingly deranged, like a mad animal almost, obsessed with killing Luke

Skywalker even when it was clear that Jaina was the one hunting him.

Tahiri shuddered and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but no, I don't remember anything about Yuuzhan Vong bioweapons."

"What about Vong- sorry, *Yuuzhan* Vong- biotech in general? I heard he had some installed on his star destroyer and used it to torture Ben."

"He did," Tahiri nodded gravely. "I'm not sure where he got it from, though. He... He took me to Myrkr a few times, but everything there was dead."

"Myrkr?" Jaina tensed at the planet's name.

"Like I said, he could have gotten it from plenty of other Vongformed worlds." She saw a question in Jaina's eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "We went back to Myrkr a few times, to the worldship, *Baanu Rass*. It's breaking apart now, and it's all open to the vacuum, which is why I don't think he picked up any *live* biotech from there. But when we went back he... Let me see Anakin. With his flow-walking. I didn't believe it would work at first, but it was so real..." She looked down, afraid to see Jaina's face. "I thought it *was* real, that I was really seeing the real Anakin, touching him, talking to him, just like I used to. Like we used to."

"It was an illusion," Jaina said, softly, without reproach. "He was using it against you."

"I know. But I wanted to believe him, so badly." She hugged herself tighter. "Jaina... It could be so easy sometimes. Scarily easy. To get what I wanted I just had to do what *he* wanted me to... So I did what I did, to Pellaeon, to Shevu..."

Jaina didn't dare speak. Tahiri knew she was coming off as a victim again, weak and pathetic, but she'd never confessed this to *anyone* before and if she was

going to say it to someone who else could it be but Jaina?

She squeezed her eyes shut. "The nanovirus. I knew Caedus was working with the Moff's to make it. It was supposed to be used against Boba Fett. I had no idea they'd use it against Tenel Ka and her child. You have to believe that, Jaina. I didn't want to hurt them."

"I know. Neither did Jacen."

"That's why he killed Isolder. He killed him and took his body off to be incinerated because he thought it would keep the Moff's from making a nanovirus from his DNA. I don't know what he did in the end, but he was trying to protect Tenel Ka and her daughter then."

"That is what he did in the end. Protect them." Jaina said, and for the first time Tahiri heard the deep, deep sadness in her voice.

"He didn't though," Tahiri sniffed. "Tenel Ka's daughter, Allana, she..."

Jaina took two steps forward and squeezed Tahiri's shoulder. "No. Allana's alive."

Tahiri blinked wetness from her eyes and met Jaina's. "What do you mean alive? They held a funeral for her, they-"

"Everyone needs to think she's dead. It's for her own safety. She's with my parents now. They're calling her Amelia and saying they adopted her as a war orphan."

"But... why? *How*? How did she survive?"

"I told you. It was Jacen." A few tears finally appeared in Jaina's hard eyes. "He sent a warning in the Force. Right before I killed him."

Tahiri's jaw dropped. Jaina went on, "He stopped fighting me, let me drive my saber through his chest, so he could warn Tenel Ka and Allana. That's why I think... I think he was Jacen again, just for a moment, when he died."

"He *died* for them?" Tahiri gasped. "But.... Why? I knew he and Tenel Ka were close once, but-"

"Allana is his daughter," Jaina said, voice breaking. It was all she needed to say. Implications rolled around in Tahiri's head and so many things finally clicked into place. The awful shape of what Caedus had done, what Jacen had allowed himself to become, became a little bit clearer.

"You don't have to feel guilty about Allana," Jaina said firmly. "She's okay now. And my parents... I think they need her even more than she needs them right now."

Tahiri sniffed and wiped her eyes clear. "Thank you, Jaina. I promise I won't tell anyone about that, but... Thank you for trusting me."

"I thought you needed to know," Jaina said, with just the hint of a wistful smile. "Where will you go now?"

"I don't know. They're sending me to Junction Station, and from there I'm on my own." She paused, then added, "You already know I'm not going back to the Jedi."

Jaina nodded, without word or judgment.

"I'll see who I can get a ride with at Junction. I think I still have some credits in my accounts, so I can probably pay someone. Assuming they're willing to transport me." The question had been niggling in the back of her mind for the past few minutes, so she had to ask, "Who's investigating that Vong bioweapon?"

"Uncle Luke is sending out people. So's Jag and so's Tenel Ka."

"What about the Alliance?"

"To be honest, I think Uncle Luke's afraid Daala might want that weapon for herself. So we're keeping this as quiet as possible."

"Thank you for trusting me."

“Well, you’d be the person to ask, for a lot of reasons.”

She was also the person who stood the best chance of *doing* something about the bioweapon for those very same reasons. Jaina didn’t come out and say it, but Tahiri was sure she was thinking the same thing.

“Listen,” Tahiri said at last, “If I hear anything about the bioweapon, or if I think of anything new... Who should I contact?”

With a slight, tired smile, Jaina took a small datacard out of her pocket. “That has my encrypted comm freq on it, plus the info we have on this bioweapon, which isn’t much.”

Tahiri wrapped her palm around it. “Thank you for this, Jaina. Thank you so much.”

“Not a problem.” Her expression relaxed, finally, into that slanted smile that was the Solo family trademark. “Take care of yourself, Tahiri. Promise me I’ll see you again.”

“I promise.”

For a moment it felt like Jaina wanted to step forward, bridge the gap, and given Tahiri an embrace. But she held back, hesitated, then turned wordlessly. Tahiri picked up her bags and started walking to the shuttle and its impatient guards with new purpose in her step.

Jaina hadn’t changed everything. What happened to her now- the choices she made, the risks she took- all of it would be done by herself, with no one’s influence.

From here on out, Tahiri was on her own.

CHAPTER 8

They called him a guest but by now Zekk was pretty sure he was prisoner. On the way to what they'd generously called his 'living quarters' he and Harn had passed a half-dozen beings of various species, none of whom looked him in the eye. Then he was shown into a room barely big enough for him to lay down in. Harn closed the door and left him there, and when he'd tried to use the panel by the door to operate the comm or even open the door, it was utterly nonresponsive.

So, in short, he was trapped in a box.

He couldn't see any obvious cameras but he decided to act as though there were. He spent a few hours on the bed reviewing the information Harn had presented him with, and despite his anxiety he found them to be shocking reading. As Harn had said, Jacen Solo, the Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance- the one who'd called himself Darth Caedus- was dead, killed by his sister aboard *Anakin Solo*. It was hard to feel satisfaction from that, but at least Jaina was safe.

The rest of it, though, was even more troubling. According to the files, which certainly seemed to be legitimate reports from legitimate news-nets, the Alliance and the separatists had quickly agreed to

peace talks with Jacen out of the way. He would have felt cheered by that, but it said that Natasi Daala, former Imperial Admiral, war criminal, and general mad nexu, had been chosen to replace Caedus, and had declared her main priority to be reining in 'dangerous Jedi and their destructive impulses.'

It was enough to make him think that Harn was playing some really weird joke on him, but the other bit of information made his heart drop into his gut. According to multiple reports, and Imperial attack on the Hapan flagship had killed hundreds of people with a nanovirus, including Queen Tenel Ka's daughter.

The very thought made Zekk feel disgusted with himself. Tenel Ka was one of his oldest friends, but she'd had a child years ago and Zekk hadn't seen her or learned anything about her. He'd barely made the effort; passing years had taken their lives in different directions. Old friends from Yavin 4 had become further apart than ever.

He'd only seen Allana once, shortly before the final battle against Caedus; the girl's bright red hair had suggested her mother, but in the face he'd seen echoes of Jacen Solo. He hadn't been able to bring himself to ask Tenel Ka about Allana's father, and now- even if he managed to escape this ship, whatever it was- he knew he never would.

It filled him with an oppressive feeling of failure that burdened him for hours, but as time went by he realized that that feeling wouldn't simply go away, and that he was still stuck in this so-called living quarters with no way out.

It all made him restless. He'd been willing to humor his captors, to wait them out, but he simply couldn't stand being trapped like this, doing nothing, relying on other people to decide his fate for him.

Of all things, he found himself reminded of the time after Jaina's other brother had died. She'd been wracked by grief and eager to avenge Anakin, and Zekk had found himself frightened of what Jaina, the girl who'd been the bright light of his troubled youth for years, was becoming. When he'd been trained at the Shadow Academy, Jaina had been brave enough to step in his way and stop him from falling fully into the dark. When the time had come for him to return the favor he'd found himself weak and had slunk away, leaving Jaina to battle her inner dark with the help of others.

It wasn't a period he liked to think about. In some ways, he knew, he'd latched onto Jaina after the Vong War as a way of making up for that cowardice. He'd hoped he could repair their relations, maybe even win back her old affection, and because of that he'd allowed himself to be drawn after her even when it was doing neither of them any good. He could see now that he'd already lost her all those years ago and had adamantly refused to admit it.

Some mistakes could never be rectified, and it did harm to try. But this was different. Instead of cowering in weakness or indecision here could *act*, right here and right now, and take his fate into his own hands.

He put the datapad aside and sat upright in the bed. He set himself into a Jedi meditative post and began stretching out with the Force, beyond the walls of his cell. He sensed a mass of life in all directions, beings of all shapes and sizes and temperaments that made of this vessel's crew. He had no way of knowing for sure, but he guessed the crew complement was well over one hundred.

That meant it was going to be hard to locate the captain. He tried to find Harn amidst all those teeming

lives but got nothing; Baragwin were hard to read in the Force. There were other options. He could try to find the bridge, or the captain's quarters. Locating either would require access to an information node, but if he escaped this cell one of those wouldn't be hard to find.

He narrowed his focus and found the Force-signatures of two anonymous beings standing on the other side of the door. Guards, probably. He sensed that they were tired or bored, and wondered when the ship's next sleep-cycle was going to be. He remembered lights dimming and raising when he was in the bacta tank, but that was no guarantee the lights in his cell would follow the same pattern.

Still, it was something. He wanted to break from this cell right now, knock out the guards, and ransack this ship until he found the captain and got some answers, but he forced himself to be calm. He would wait a little longer, until the guards changed or the ship enter sleep-cycle. He would sense the crew laying down to rest in the Force, and then he would know to make his move.

The door was locked but it was only a door, simple and un-armored. It would be easy to get through. He could take care of the guards too if he caught them by surprise.

So Zekk stayed in his meditation pose, back straight and eyes closed. He waited for his chance. He felt it was coming soon.

The Jedi gave no indication that he could see the pinpoint holo-cam lens placed in the upper corner of his cel, but most likely acting on the assumption it was there. Whatever else you could say about his kind, they weren't stupid.

Chazdrul Harn wished he could say the same about himself. When they'd found the Jedi floating in the

Transitory Mists he'd recommended they leave him there, but Captain Praelyx had insisted otherwise, and that meant *Wayward Soldier* had what was potentially an extremely dangerous weapon waiting to go off at any moment.

Harn wasn't opposed to taking risks necessarily—otherwise he'd never become what he was: a privateer, smuggler, sometimes-pirate, and first officer of a combat-ready mercenary gunship. He just wanted to know his potential gains as well as he knew his potential losses.

As he watched the holo-cam feed from the Jedi's cell in a quiet corner of *Wayward Soldier*'s command deck, the Baragwin could see a lot of ways this Jedi could be the end of them and few ways it would turn out for their benefit.

"He looks harmless, doesn't he?" grunted the Rodian beside him. Right now, the Jedi was sitting cross-legged on his bed in some kind of meditation pose.

Harn glanced at Neevo. "Yes. *Looks.*"

"You ever seen a Jedi before?" asked the Rodian.

Harn shook his heavy head. "Never really wanted to."

"I have. Back during the Vong War."

Neevo, he knew, had been part of the Peace Brigade then, the band who had aligned themselves with the invaders in hopes of saving their own necks. Peace Brigaders had gone down in infamy as traitors to civilization since then, but Harn didn't blame Neevo for it. He'd done his own stint with the Brigade too. It had seemed the practical choice at the time.

Harn had never handed over Jedi, though, so he asked, "Did you capture one of them for the Vong?"

Neevo nodded. "I was running with Tavira's crew then. Got a pretty young Twi'lek thing. Captured her

and dropped her on a moon for the Vong warmaster to pick up. Funny, I can't remember her name."

It probably didn't matter. Whoever the Twi'lek had been she'd surely died in agony.

"These Jedi," Harn said, "Can they really read minds?"

"A little." Neevo paused, then added, "I wouldn't think too much about old jobs when I'm around him, if I were you."

"I definitely won't," Harn growled.

"I just wish I knew what the captain wanted with him," Neevo said under his breath.

"The captain thinks he can use him."

"The captain should know better," Neevo said. He'd been on this ship four years and knew Praelyx's past as much as Harn did.

"I already told him that. Do you know what he said?"

"What?"

"Fortune favors the bold."

Neevo grunted and shook his head. "Well. We're about to find out, aren't we?"

CHAPTER 9

Tenel Ka knew the day had been coming, and she'd been dreading it more than anything since her father's death. Ben, Master Skywalker, and most of the Jedi had already departed for Shedu Maad.

Now she had to say goodbye to the Solos: Han and Leia, Jaina, and the girl the rest of the galaxy knew as Amelia.

For the sake of privacy, she joined the Solos on the landing pad and followed them inside the *Millennium Falcon*. The old freighter had been badly battered during the war, including the time it had been fired upon by Jacen himself, but despite the small changes Tenel Ka noticed as she walked through its halls, it still carried the shabby, well-love airs it had since well before she'd been born.

As she accompanied the Solos to the *Falcon*'s main crew lounge she observed, "This ship is so utterly unlike Hapan vessels it's frankly refreshing."

Jaina smiled at that, a weary, honest smile. There'd been so few of those lately. "What, don't you like your ships pretty and spit-polished all the time?"

"Upkeep is important, but I cannot think of any vessel in my fleet with as much... soul as this one."

"Well, she's passed through a lot of hands over the years," Han said, running his along its padded circular ceiling brace.

"That's true, dear, but you've made it your own," his wife said, hooking an arm into his and leaning her head against his shoulder.

The sight of the them sharing such open, earnest affection clawed Tenel Ka's heart. The times when she and Jacen had been allowed to be themselves together had been so few. She found herself envying the old couple not just for their well-loved spaceship, but for the freedom to have each other.

Allana interrupted her thoughts by tugging on her grandfather's trouser-leg and asking, "Grandpa Han, who owned it before you?"

"I already told you, darling. It was Uncle Lando's."

"Who owned it before him?"

Han's face twisted in thought. Tenel Ka was surprised he didn't know. The old smuggler gave a lanky shrug and said, "I'm sure I'll remember. Just give me a minute."

"When can I meet Uncle Lando?" pressed Allana.

"Have you been telling her stories already?" Tenel Ka asked.

Han chuckled and mussed her dyed-dark hair. "Why, we can go find Lando, first thing... Just as soon as I figure out where he is. You know Lando, he's always pulling some scheme somewhere..."

Tenel Ka glanced at Jaina. "Will you be staying with your family for a time?"

"I think so," the other woman nodded, hands on her hips. "It's been a long time since I talked to Lando, and I want to see how Tendra is coming along."

"Lando's wife?" Tenel Ka cocked an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

"Tendra's pregnant," Leia supplied. "Lando's going to be a father."

"Indeed?" She'd thought he was too old for that but didn't dare say it.

"Lando, a dad," Han shook his head. "I guess stranger things have happened."

Despite her own fresh losses, Tenel Ka felt heartened by the fact that there was still new life coming into the galaxy. "I hope you all have a relaxing... vacation."

"Yeah, we'll do our best," Jaina said, though her smile faltered. They all knew Jacen was still too much with them.

Leia leaned closer to Allana and said, "You need to say goodbye to your mom now, Allana. It's going to be a while before you see her again."

A while. A nebulous, undetermined time, but whatever it would be, it would be for too long. Allana detached herself from Han's leg and Tenel Ka bent low to take the girl in her arms.

"Enjoy your time with your grandparents," Tenel Ka whispered. "And stay safe."

"I'll be fine, Mama," Allana said. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too," Tenel Ka lowered her head against Allana's crown so the Solos couldn't see her expression.

But two of them were Jedi and the third was Han Solo, so of course they knew. As Tenel Ka let go of her daughter and stood up, Han said, "You know how to reach our encrypted freq, don't you?"

"Of course," she nodded. "I will try not to call too frequently."

"Call as much as you like," the old smuggler said, and his voice went uncharacteristically soft. "You're part of the family now, kid, remember that. Any time you need help, we'll come."

She saw it in Leia and Han's eyes both, the softness, the aching concern. She'd known them for over a decade but they'd only started looking at her like that since they learned Allana's parentage. Those looks held so much deep regret, so much pain that could never be healed.

But Allana went back between them, and she saw their faces growing warmer. Tenel Ka did her best to smile back and say, "I must be going. Goodbye, and may the Force be with you."

"You too, kid. Take care of yourself."

"I will."

She turned to Jaina, but before she could say anything her friend held up a hand and said, "I'll walk you out. Let's go."

They made their way back to the landing ramp without talking, but once they stood at its top, out of the view the guards on the landing pad and the Solos down the hall, Jaina put a hand on Tenel Ka's shoulder and said, "Think you'll be okay?"

"If Allana's all right, so am I."

"There's no better pair of caretakers in the galaxy. I just want you to know..." Jaina hesitated. Tenel Ka waited for her to find the words. Finally she managed, "I just want you to know I'm sorry."

Tenel Ka shook her head. "Jaina, you of all people have *nothing* to apologize for. You did what you had to do stop Caedus and there was no way you could have known he was trying to warn me."

"I could have. I could have felt it in the Force." Jaina sighed. "But even if the Jacen in those last few moments... Tenel Ka, I had to do it."

"Jaina, I know. You have nothing to apologize for."

"I wasn't even apologizing for that." Jaina planted hands on her hips and shook her head ruefully. "What

I'm really sorry for is that I never saw Allana until now."

"She's deserved better than she's gotten on almost every front," Tenel Ka admitted. "I think this change will do her good. Hapes is a poor place to raise a child, especially royalty."

"Yeah, I guess I understand why you wanted to spend all your time on Yavin 4." Jaina attempted one of those Solo grins, but it didn't stick very well. "Still, though... I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything... Anything I could have done, anything that could have helped you and him and Allana."

She still couldn't say Jacen's name; neither could Tenel Ka. She shook her head. "The decision to hide Allana's parentage was mine. One Jedi parent puts her in enough danger; two would be too much. There was nothing you could have done, Jaina. You can't change what Hapes is. None of us can."

"Well," Jaina swallowed, "It's a good thing Allana's got someone else to take care of her for a while."

"Yes, it is. Will you stay with your parents long?"

Jaina took her hand off Tenel Ka's shoulder, finally, and gave a loose shrug. "Maybe. I don't have any Alliance commission any more and Uncle Luke says the Jedi can deal without their Sword for a while. He's trying to be considerate, but I think I'll head to Shedu Maad soon enough. I can't just sit around thinking, I have to *do* things. I'll probably go see Jag, too, when he finds the time."

"Jagged?" Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow. "Are you, perhaps...?"

Jaina nodded; her smile was uncharacteristically shy. "I think we've... sorted some things out. Finally."

"I'm glad for you, friend Jaina. You should be with who you wish to be with."

She could barely get the words out without choking. Jaina pulled her in for one more, tight hug, then pulled away. "I'll see you again, Your Majesty."

"Sooner rather than later, I hope. Goodbye, Jaina."

Tenel Ka walked down the ramp to the edge of the landing platform. Guards hovered at arms' length but she pointedly ignored them as she stayed to watch that battered, loved old freighter retract its ramp and landing gear, rise into the air on a buffer of repulsor-energy, and fire its engines. She stayed and watched until the streak of its engine-flare disappeared among the clouds and took her family with it.

CHAPTER 10

Tahiri decided that, if you could ignore the spotless walls and decks and the beautiful women guards with gray uniforms constantly marching patrols, Junction Station could have fit anywhere in the galaxy. It contained a broad melange of species, from humans to standard space-faring races like Duros and Dresselians to some she couldn't even recognize. They were bartering goods, buying drinks from cantinas, and purchasing parts for their ships. The galaxy was full of waystations like this and it almost made Tahiri feel comfortably anonymous.

Almost, but not quite. Whether real or imagined, she kept on feeling like the beings she passed on the promenade were staring at the three scars on her forehead, and if they were staring at her scars it meant they knew who she was: Tahiri Veila, Jacen Solo's pawn, murderer of defenseless old men and prisoners. They were probably wondering what she was doing walking free, then checking to see if the Imperials had put out a bounty on her as soon as she turned her back.

Sometimes she thought that, but there was no way of telling what was real and what was wrought by her own addled conscience. Not even the Force seemed to give any clues, but nobody tried to point a blaster at her

and on the one occasion when she did visit a cantina for a drink, she found herself cornered by an Arkona with a salt addiction who went straight from asking her name to begging her to bunk with him. Which meant she was something close to anonymous after all.

She'd already decided what she needed to do. If Darth Caedus had left one last scheme in motion before his death, she had a duty to stop it. It was the first small thing she could do to atone for her service to the Sith Lord. It wouldn't be enough to absolve her, but it was a start, and the fact that it involved the Yuuzhan Vong, that other half of her self that she'd been trying to repress since leaving Zonama Sekot seven years back, made it seem all the more imperative that she act. Thankfully, her accounts with Alliance banks were still open, which meant she had credits to pay her fare.

She still needed to hire a ship, specifically one whose crew would take her to a world that had been Vongformed. There wasn't going to be many of those, but thankfully Junction Station had a localized data-net where beings could post advertisements for just about anything. When she first accessed it from the data-port in the capsule room she'd rented, she found classifieds requesting everything from 'a fast ship with guns, no questions asked' to 'an intimate evening with five virile Yuzzem'. Unsurprisingly, no one else was looking for passage to a Vongformed planet.

So she put up the advertisement, and then she resigned herself to waiting.

A few responses were obviously fakes; many didn't even mention her request at all and simply advertised cheap spaceship parts, military-grade weapons, and love serums that supposedly worked for every species in the galaxy. Tahiri was starting to wonder whether Tenel Ka should try running this place with a tighter

hand when she saw one response that actually looked viable. A ship called *Third Time's the Charm*, owned by one Needa Kailo, was currently refueling at Junction after completing a cargo run. Tahiri set up a meeting and went to go see Kailo and *Third Time* in person.

Her first impression was good. The ship was a sleek Ubrikkian model and the droid crew cleaning up its hull looked new and efficient. The captain, too, seemed charming: a tall human a little older than Tahiri herself, with dark hair and piercing blue eyes.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Kailo grinned as he shook her hand. "What's your name, Miss?"

"Jadesei Horn," she smiled back. She didn't have identicards to back that up, but had instead decided to pick a very common name and stick with it.

"Now, Miss Horn," he said, walking her around his ship, "I have to say I haven't seen a request like yours in, well, ever. What makes you want to go visit a world the Vong have all messed up?"

"I'm an independent researcher. My client hired me to take samples of Yuuzhan Vong life-forms and relay them back to her." Lying wasn't supposed to be a Jedi trait but she'd gotten pretty good at it. Maybe she had Caedus to thank.

"Hmmm, interesting. And what does your client want with them?"

"Not my job to ask," she said, and hoped that deflected some of his questions too.

"That's fair enough, but Miss, what kind of experience do you have with the Vong?"

He was looking at her scars and trying not to. She had a lie prepared for this too. "I grew up on Garqi. When the Vong came, they killed my whole family. I barely escaped." She tapped her forehead. "These are

what some warrior left me with before I was able to get away.”

He shook his head sadly. “Shame to mess a pretty face like yours. Do you want to see inside *Three Times*?”

“Gladly,” Tahiri said, and she was honestly impressed by how slick and clean the inside of the ship was too.

As he showed her its hallways and cockpit he said, “I was from Gyndine myself, and you know what the Vong did there. I never want to go back, to be honest. They say they’ve been doing some cleanup, but, well, it just wouldn’t be home no matter what.”

Something felt strange aboard the ship, and Tahiri couldn’t tell if she was just being paranoid or if something else was wrong. She didn’t sense much from Kailo in the Force except a vague curiosity beneath his friendly persona.

As she looked around the two-seat cockpit she asked, “Where is your co-pilot?”

Kaill chuckled and scratched his hair almost sheepishly. “You see, the thing about that is, I don’t have one. All my crew are droids. *Good* droids, mind you. I treat them better than I’d treat flesh and blood.”

“You don’t get lonely?”

He shrugged. “Truth be told, I like long trips by myself. Gives me plenty of time to think. And when I do get lonely, well, that’s when I take passengers.”

He smiled again, that winning smile, the kind that made Tahiri frankly surprised he didn’t have more company, especially the female kind.

“Do you have much cargo?” Kailo asked as they walked back down the halls toward the crew cabins.

She shook her head. “Very little. I’ve always traveled light.”

"Well, that's excellent. I've always tried not to keep too many possessions. There's no point in having clutter lying around."

Tahiri nodded agreement, but when she walked past the portal to the ship's port airlock, a shudder ran through her body and nearly dropped her to her knees.

"Miss Horn?" Kailo asked, voice suddenly alarmed. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," she muttered and rose to her feet, placing one hand against the airlock frame to steady herself.

Then it rushed at her: a sensation of panic, of pain, of breathless desperation.

She took her hand off the portal-frame and it was gone. She looked up at Kailo and he looked down at her with curiosity but, she sensed beneath it, some alarm too; alarm not for her, but for him.

"Are you all right?" he repeated.

She smiled. "Of course. I've just been a little... under the weather."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Kailo frowned. "If it's an ongoing problem, I promise I've got a really well-stocked medicine room. Would you like to see it?"

His eyes showed concern, but something dim in the Force said he just wanted to get some place else.

"That's all right," she said. "We can go the crew quarters. I just need a minute. I'm a little dizzy is all."

Then she reached out to touch the frame again. She closed her eyes and prepared herself for it this time. The shock of it still took her breath away. She felt not just the residual fear and panic, but the physical sensation of hands clawing at the smooth durasteel of the doorframe, the harsh rush of wind as the airlock opened on the vacuum, the inexorable pull of atmosphere as it raced into empty space, taking life with it.

Then Tahiri opened her eyes and did her best to smile and lie. "I'm all right now, Mister Kailo. Let's go."

For the rest of the tour she did her best to act like nothing had happened. She passed a few of his maintenance droids and wondered how long ago that person had gone out the airlock and how long ago these droids had had their memories wiped.

She kept on lightly running her fingertips across exposed surfaces, touching everything she could while he wasn't looking. The ability to pick of past events and memories in the Force via tactile contact had never been her strongest skill, but the sheer trauma of the death at the airlock was impossible to ignore.

Nothing else in the ship screamed to her like that, but sometimes she thought she felt wisps of memory brush against her, hinting at more but revealing nothing. By the end of the tour Kailo seemed to have dropped back into his normal mode: easy, friendly, handsome, slightly cool and clinical. She told him she had one more offer to look at, but that she would get back to him very shortly.

She had no other offer, not that she'd seen, but that didn't matter. She considered walking straight to the near Hapan guard patrol and telling them to put Kailo and his ship under lockdown and do a full forensic search, including checking the memories of all those droids. But doing that would make her presence on the station all the more obvious, and she was sure a lot of those Hapan guards would recognize her. They might even refuse to take her seriously.

So instead she went back to Junction's internal data-network and, sure enough, found a way to submit complaints and concerns anonymously to the Hapan guards. Tahiri had been wrong before; Tenel Ka definitely was doing a good job in running this station.

Tahiri submitted her notice from the public work station, saying that she had strong reason to believe Captain Kailo of the *Third Times the Charm* had forced passengers from the airlock of his ship into space, killing them. She gave no specific reason, but she suggested the guards perform a thorough search of the droid crews' memories to be sure.

After that, she went back to her capsule-cabin. She felt accomplished enough for her good deed, but she knew she'd gotten no closer to her ultimate goal, and for all she knew she only had a small-time frame to work with. So she went back onto the data-network and began to look for responses once again.

When Tahiri went to visit the next ship that offered to fly her to a Vongformed planet she advanced with considerable trepidation. The response seemed legitimate, the captain professional, but so had Needa Kailo of the *Third Times the Charm*, and according to the most recent news posted on Junction Station's data network, he'd just been arrested on suspicion of criminal activity and his ship had been impounded as a crime scene.

When she got to the docking station and saw the new ship, she immediately felt more comfortable. The disc-shaped Corellian YT-2000-model freighter called *Mandala* reminded her of the Solos' *Falcon*, not just for the similar design, but for the countless small pock-marks on its hull, the carbon-scoring around its engines, and all the other signs of loving use the ship had clearly accumulated over years of service.

The captain was a human woman on the far end of middle age. She introduced herself as Rahley Muro, an independent cargo hauler who mostly did runs in the Inner- and Mid-Rim sections of the galaxy. Muro gave Tahiri a tour of the inside of her ship, which was also

reminiscent of the *Falcon*, and introduced her co-pilot and business partner, a short furry Bimm named Revli Vjarna. There was not a maintenance droid in sight, and that also helped Tahiri's mood. The Bimm greeted her from a special chair designed to give the small alien full access to the control panels in the cockpit, which unlike the *Falcon* was located at the fore of the ship, jutting out from its central disc.

After the tour and introductions, Muro led Tahiri bak to the circular crew lounge, where the two of them sat down on a battered leather-faced sofa and began to talk the business end through.

"I'll be straight with you, Miss Horn," Muro said. "Any trip to a planet that still has Vong life on it is going to cost more."

"I understand."

"I usually charge a flat rate per distance traveled which is pretty much on-line with what you'd find in cargo transit for this part of space. But for this trip, I'm going to have to charge an additional fifty percent."

Tahiri nodded. "That's fine. I was expecting that."

"All right then." An ambiguous frown played on the woman's face. "What planet, exactly, do you plan on visiting?"

"It may be more than one," Tahiri said. "Is that all right with you?"

The frown deepened. "I'm willing, but it will be an additional fifty percent for every new planet we go to."

"Like I said, I'm fine with that."

"What place are you going to first?"

She knew, deep down, that it would smart to check the worldship at Myrkr. She knew Caedus had been there with her already and possibly more times besides, but there was no telling what other places he'd been in search of deadly Yuuzhan Vong technology.

She wouldn't go to Myrkr, though, not now. Every part of her resisted going back to that world- for the old scars it had left and the more recent ones. She'd rather go to any Vongformed world over that one.

For better or worse, there were plenty more to pick from.

She leaned a little closer to the captain and said, "I'd like to go a world called Euceron. Do you know where that is?"

Muro nodded. "Off the Perlemian. Less than a week from here." She added darkly, "It's been totally uninhabited since the Vong came."

"That's the point," Tahiri said.

That, and the fact that the shapers had developed an extensive research facility on the planet's northern hemisphere. She remembered that from her conversations with Yuuzhan Vong scientists on Zonama Sekot. She wished she could go back to the living world, not just to seek help in this search but just to *go back*, but she knew neither the Jedi nor Alliance Intelligence would let her in on its location.

Muro was still frowning. "May I ask why you want to go to Euceron?"

"I already told you. I've been hired by a researcher to collect samples of Yuuzhan Vong life-forms. I was raised on Garqi and was there when it was invaded, so I have a lot of first-hand experience with Vong-formed biotech."

"I don't suppose you'd be interested in telling me who, exactly, wants those samples?"

Tahiri shook her head. "I'm sorry, that's confidential."

Muro's eyes narrowed. "May I ask another question?"

Tahiri didn't like where this was going. "Of course."

"What's your *real* name, Miss Horn?"

Muro stared. Tahiri blinked. Then she sighed. This was, all things considered, unsurprising. In retrospect she really should have adopted some disguise.

"My name is Tahiri Veila," she said simply. "I suppose you've heard of me."

"You've been big news in the Hapes Consortium. Traffic to this station was totally shut down during the fight but Revli and I were both stuck here, watching whatever news we could get from the 'nets. We heard about happened to Jacen Solo, and his..."

"Apprentice," Tahiri supplied.

"To be honest, I'm a little surprised they let you go."

"So was I."

"Up until last year, I never had anything against Jedi. I thought you people were the biggest heroes of the Vong War and if that furball on Coruscant had listened to you we might have ended that war with a lot less people dead. But when Jacen Solo started locking up Corellians I started to wonder. When he started burning planets, well, that pretty much changed my mind."

"Jacen wasn't a—" Tahiri stopped. Most beings barely understood what Jedi really were, let alone Sith. Trying to explain those difference would just get them off-track, so she held Muro's eyes and said, "I won't defend what Jacen did. Right now, I'm trying to atone."

"By scoping out Vongformed planets?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Believe it or not, yes. I've been led to believe there's a weapon being made from Yuuzhan Vong biotech. I'm trying to stop that from happening."

"Is this some Jedi mission? Did Skywalker put you up to this?"

"No. I'm doing this alone." She felt a tiny bit of compassion lead through Muro's carefully guarded

emotions and pressed, "I'm trying to make up for what I did under Jacen. Do you believe that's possible? Do you think someone can really make up for all the bad things they've done?"

She really wanted to know. She didn't know if she believed it herself.

Quietly, Muro said, "I hope so."

"So do I, Captain. More than anything in the galaxy."

Muro regarded her for a long time, dark eyes boring into Tahiri's green. In the end, she gave a tiny nod and said, "I'll still take your credits."

Tahiri allowed a smile. "And get me to Euceron?"

"And get you to Euceron."

"Thank you so much for trusting me, Captain."

"Trust?" Muro arched an eyebrow. "I wouldn't go that far. But credits are a good start. Thirty-percent up front."

"I'll transfer them right away." Tahiri extended a hand. "Thank you, Captain."

"Don't thank me yet," Muro said, but she reached out and shook anyway.

Tahiri decided that was good enough.

CHAPTER 11

Sometimes Tenel Ka needed a reminder that, despite all she'd lost recently through deaths and departures, she was not totally alone on Hapes. She was glad, then, when her cousins Trista and Taryn Zel returned to the Fountain Palace.

The twins had become her most trusted agents since becoming queen, and after helping Ben Skywalker capture Tahiri Veila during the attack on Uroro Station, she'd sent them outside the Consortium to help Jagged Fel investigate responsibility for the attack on *Dragon Queen*. Any official cooperation, let alone conversation, between her Consortium and the Imperial Remnant was currently unthinkable, but through the Zel sisters she'd managed all the information exchange she'd needed.

"Head of State Fel is on his way to Selonja now," Trista explained as the three red-haired women walked through the same sound-dampened garden in which Tenel Ka had previously talked with Master Skywalker.

"So are Daala and Phennir. I've heard the Verpines and even the Mandalorians will be sending delegates," Taryn continued. "The conference is set to last one standard week. Now that the cease-fire has been

stabilized, it seems like all parties are willing to sit down and begin hacking out a long-term agreement.”

“So all those systems will be re-integrated into one union?” asked Tenel Ka,

Taryn shrugged. “It’s still a little too soon for that. You can’t clean up easily after a big messy war.”

That was true in all kinds of ways. On Tenel Ka’s own order, the Hapans were sitting out these peace talks in protest of the Imperial Remnant’s presence. It was clear Hapes would have to take part in a final settlement, but right now the nobles wouldn’t countenance anything that looked like a tacit approval of Imperial policies. Frankly, Tenel Ka didn’t blame them.

She asked, “What about the attack on *Dragon Queen*? What else do you know?”

“After analyzing comm logs with Fel, it mostly verified our initial assumptions,” said Trista. “Ducha Requud and her military wing weren’t active in the nanovirus plot, but once they saw *Dragon Queen* was under attack, they immediately tried to capitalize on the situation.”

As usual, Taryn easily picked up where her sister left off, but with a more breezy and casual tone. “That’s why there was that big burst of comm transmissions between her *Deserving Gem* and the Imperial fleet. She was trying to make last-ditch negotiations to secure Imperial support for her rule.”

“Needless to say, she was unsuccessful,” Trista deadpanned.

The sisters had meted out swift justice to the traitors without Tenel Ka even having to give the order. At first it had disturbed her how easily her cousins could pass down lethal judgment, but as the years went by she’d grown to rely on it. It was one of many ways her rule had made her feel separated from her Jedi training.

“Is there any sign that other nobles were in contact with the Imperials?”

“Fel gave us access to all comm logs from his ships during the battle, and there was nothing,” Trista said. “However, we can’t rule out that some logs were tampered with, or that transmissions took place before the battle between different ships.”

Tenel Ka restrained a sigh. Uncertainty often seemed the only certainty in Hapan politics; that, and the fact that someone somewhere was running some scheme against you.

“And what about the Yuuzhan Vong bioweapon?” Tenel Ka asked. “Master Skywalker already told me the basics. He said there *might* be a weapon that the Remnant was researching, but there was no clue as to where.”

“We may have uncovered a small clue,” Trista said. “According to comm logs, there was a heavy comm exchange between *Anakin Solo* and the star destroyer *Gold Fortress* after the battle at Roche and before they moved on Shedua Maad. After *that*, a shuttle departed *Gold Fortress* without giving its flight clearance. Then it jumped to hyperspace on a vector that would have taken them deeper into Hapan space, although we can’t be sure of any destination.”

“That Jag Fel was very helpful,” Taryn added. “Shame he’s taken.”

Trista rolled her eyes. “You have such a short attention span. What happened to that black-haired Jedi were were on about?”

Taryn glanced at Tenel Ka. “What did happen to him? I heard he went MIA during the battle. Did you find him?”

Tenel Ka shook her head. “We searched the Mists for weeks. We didn’t find his ship or his body.”

Taryn looked genuinely saddened; a rare sight. Then she shook it off like she usually did, saying, “Anyway, Your Majesty, Fel said he was trying to track where that shuttle went and why but said it’s been very difficult so far. However when he *does* find out, he’ll let us know.”

“I suppose that will have to do,” Tenel Ka said. She’d hoped for something better, because she knew she’d never rest easy until she knew Caedus’ last threat had been taken care of.

“We’ll still keep looking ourselves,” Taryn said. “We’ve put out the call to a few of our, ah, private contractors. If any of them find things, they’ll let us know.”

By *private contractors* Taryn essentially meant mercenaries. The Consortium itself had been founded by pirates, centuries back, and the use of privateers to do Hapan business was a longstanding tradition, but Tenel Ka had never liked relying on beings who were loyal to credits above anything else.

Still, for the moment, it would have to do.

“What would you have us do now, Your Majesty?” asked Trista.

Tenel Ka thought for a moment. “We should begin vetting the nobles to see if anyone else might have been in contact with the Remnant. You may have to obtain comm logs to see if any transmissions were made recently.”

That was no easy task; each Ducha had a large degree of autonomy over her world, and they wouldn’t take kindly to outsiders poking around their business- even if those outsiders were other Hapans.

But the Zel sisters, thankfully, knew their way around such obstacles. Taryn, cheerily, said, “That shouldn’t be a problem, Your Majesty. Anything else?”

“Not for Trista. I have something else, however, for you.”

Taryn bowed her head and waited.

“I’ve recently been told of a scientist my grandmother used to employ named Sinsor Khal. Apparently he had a laboratory on Gallinore during the Yuuzhan Vong War where he used to experiment with their technology.”

“Do we know where he is now?” asked Taryn.

She shook her head. “We don’t even know if he’s alive. But if he is, he might well be involved in the Imperials in their bioweapon project. Even if he’s not, I’d like to know for sure.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I’ll look into it. Is there anything else?”

It was, Tenel Ka decided, good to have some family left. “No,” she said, “I think that should keep you both quite busy for now.”

CHAPTER 12

As he prepared to escape from his cell, overpower his guards, and hunt down the captain of a ship full of hostiles with no weapons and no clue as to where said captain was, Zekk reflected that he must have done something stupider at some point, though he couldn't think of it at the moment.

He'd kept himself open to the Force, and even though the lights in his small room never dimmed, he felt the ship's crew slowly lay down to rest as the craft switched its internal chrono to night-time. The two guards outside his door hadn't gone to sleep and hadn't been switched out, which was good, because it would leave them tired and easy to overtake.

So he hoped, anyway.

In case somebody was still watching him on a hidden camera, he began by getting off the bed and stretching. He performed normal exercises to limber his body out, carefully inching his way closer to the closed door. Finally, he feigned getting winded and slumped against the doorframe, pressing one flat palm against the door itself as though for support.

Growing up in the lower levels of Coruscant, he'd learned a natural sense of how mechanisms worked before he'd ever called them Force powers. He'd been

able to sense the gears and levers that controlled rusted doors in abandoned buildings and locate weak points in sagging floors that might collapse under his weight.

He'd also been pretty good at telekinesis.

So it wasn't very hard for him to find the mechanisms inside this simple door that kept it locked, and pull those mechanisms apart.

Then he tore the door open.

It slid aside as smoothly as if it had been controlled automatically, and Zekk immediately dashed out into the hallway. He immediately spun to his right, grabbing the gun-arm of the guard and pulling him forward, locking his other arm around the Rodian's neck. He choked the Rodian and pulled his body up as a shield so the second guard hesitated to pull his trigger. That was all Zekk needed to slam him back against the wall with the Force, knocking his head against the bulkhead and dropping him.

Zekk didn't let go of the Rodian; he kept the alien's neck in a vice-grip and waited for his body to go slack. Zekk knew roughly how long without air it would take for a human to pass out but not die; he didn't know how that worked for Rodians and he reached out with the Force, trying to sense when the alien passed out. He felt muddled panic radiating from the guard, but the panic died the same time the Rodian's green limbs stopped flailing and he dropped his pistol.

Zekk loosened his grip on the Rodian's neck but still held him up. He stretched further with the Force, trying to find some indication that alarmed troopers might be heading his way. He couldn't tell anything for sure, but he had the feeling someone might be approaching from the hallway's left entrance.

He didn't know if he had time to haul the guards into the room and close the door behind him, so he settled

with dropping the Rodian to the floor and picking up both pistols. He checked to make sure both were set to *stun*, then stuck one in his baggy jumpsuit pocket and grasped the other in two hands. Then he ran to the right, all the way to the end, and spared just a second to reach out with the Force for any presence beyond the door—nothing—before hitting the wall panel and opening it.

Another dark hallway. He ran down it, looking for an access panel where he could at least look the ship's specifications, but there wasn't even that. Zekk sensed more anxiety behind him, possibly someone finding his unconscious crewmates, so he ran all the way to the far end of the corridor, stopping only at the side of another door marked MAINTENANCE.

That, he decided, would do nicely. Maybe.

The door wasn't locked, but the room inside wasn't big either. Zekk ducked inside and closed the door behind him, then took in all the tangled machinery, the tubes of pure oxygen, the cooling rods, the bucket of steam bolts.

Then he looked up, saw the large ventilator grate, and smiled.

He felt a presence coming up the corridor outside, so he wasted no time. The ceiling grate was too high above for him to reach with his arms, but that didn't matter. He gave it one push with the Force, knocking it aside, the leaped straight up into the vent. He was a big man and was just barely able to squeeze his shoulders diagonally through the opening. He immediately pulled the rest of his body into the air conduit; it was a tight fit and he bit back groans as he folded his legs against his chest as he straightened himself out.

Turning around in here was going to be next to impossible, so one he found a direction in which to go he'd have to stick with it.

Unfortunately, there was no time to choose. He felt that presence outside the door and immediately called on the Force one last time to drop the grid in place. He crawled a good two meters down the duct, enough to get all of him out of view, and listened as the door slid open and someone walked in. He held his breath and listened, listened, but heard nothing. Finally the door slid shut again.

For a second he considered trying to ambush the being who'd been looking for him, for every crewman he attacked it just increased the risk he'd be reported or captured, so he resigned himself to shuffling through the duct as slowly and carefully as possible.

He did the best he could to move along, but the hard metal sides of the duct kept pressing his wide shoulders together. He didn't know how far he crawled before he found himself over another grate, but he got there eventually. As he peered down through the metal slats he saw the dim light of a computer console shining alone in a dark room. He stretched out with the Force again, found no one beneath, and decided this was pretty much what he'd been looking for.

Removing the grate wasn't hard, but dropping down was. It would be too awkward to shuffle around then try to lower himself feet-first, so he resigned himself to doing things the also-awkward way.

As he dropped head-and-hands-first onto the floor of the dark chamber, he found himself really wishing he was Jaina-sized. Crawling through ducts would be a lot easier then.

At least he didn't hit anything hard when he landed on the uncarpeted floor. Zekk scrambled to his feet and fumbled for a light switch. He found it on the wall next to the door, and for a second the bright light blinded him. When he pried his eyelids open again he found

himself looking at what was probably a small auxiliary communications room.

His heart lifted. He might even try to call the Jedi for help, assuming he could figure out where he was. He sat down in front of the computer console and began accessing its primary database.

He learned a lot in a very short time. Apparently they were in hyperspace, flying Coreward down the Perlemian, and when he accessed the schematics he found that he was aboard a Corellian Engineering Corp *Ranger*-class gunship.

That could mean anything. Rangers had primarily been produced for the New Republic navy in the years before the Yuuzhan Vong War, but since then they'd found themselves re-sold to local defense fleets, even smugglers and pirates who liked small, fast, well-armed capital ships.

That didn't matter, though. What mattered was that, thanks to the schematic, he was able to locate his location, the location of the captain's personal cabin, and how to get from one to the other.

It looked like the ventilation system was actually his best bet, awkward as it was; certainly he had the least chance of being spotted. He hesitated before going back up; he could still try to access the comm systems and send a message to the Jedi, and frankly he doubted he'd get another opportunity. So he called up the comm system and brought up the option to send a long-range transmission, only to find himself with a request for authorization screen.

He swore and wondered if it was worth try to force his way through. Probably not; he'd just run the risk of alerting the crew to his location. Still, he hesitated; if he didn't contact the Jedi now, he'd probably not get another chance.

The computer decided for him. The authorization screen was replaced by a flashing red one saying UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS ATTEMPTED! SECURITY ALERT!

Yes, that pretty much settled things.

Zekk hurled himself up into the vent and awkwardly pulled his legs through. He used the Force to settle the grate where it was supposed to belong just in time to hear the door open beneath him.

He tried to crawl his way through the duct as quietly as he could, and he could hear voices behind him, saying, "He was just here! I know it!"

"He wasn't in the hallway. What about the vents?"

"I don't see him."

"We have to assume he went up there."

"Then how do we stop him? He could be anywhere?"

"He can't have gone far. Come on, we'll find him."

Zekk bit back yet another swear as the two beings slipped out of the room and out of earshot. He crawled along faster now, no longer caring about the noise; he needed to reach the maintenance shaft not far ahead. Then he could climb his way up to the level with the captain's quarters.

Assuming the captain was actually *in* his quarters, which he very likely would not be if there was an emergency on the ship.

Well, maybe the captain would have something valuable Zekk could hold hostage.

He got to the shaft successfully without being caught; from there, it was a long way up and a long way down. There were ladder-rungs on one side that he could climb up, but the shaft itself was bigger than the air ducts and he was pretty sure he could use the Force to accelerate his ascent, hopefully enough to confuse the crew trying to find him.

He closed his eyes, concentrated, and drew on the Force to pull him upward. He still grabbed hold of ladder-rungs with his hands, pushing himself higher with each touch and using the Force to pull him up even higher. He made his way up to the third-highest level and stopped. There was a porthole that would let him out into a hallway, assuming he'd read the schematics right, and he reached out with the Force to sense anyone waiting for him on that end.

Nothing.

He opened the hatch manually and rolled into the dim hallway. He snapped to his feet and brought his pistol up, checking one more time to make sure it was still set to *stun*. He followed the forking paths toward where the schematic said the captain's cabin would be, one turn after another-

-and then a laser sizzled over his head. He ducked and spun around the hallway corner, peeked his head out low, then darted back under cover just before a blue laser blast nearly caught him in the face.

Well, at least *they* were using stun blasts too. Still, he really wished he had his lightsaber right now.

Zekk popped a few stun bolts down the hall to ward off pursuit, then sprinted down the hall. He knew he was just a few turns away from the captain's room, and he hung a sharp right, hoping he'd be in the clear-

-and instead another volley of stun blasts nearly got him. He ducked back into the other hallway, knowing full well they just about had him trapped. He peeked around the corner against and saw just one enemy shooting at him. He fired, ducked back, waited for a few more shots to whip past his corner, then dared stick his head out again.

This time he spotted the gunman as he took aim. Zekk reached out with the Force and grabbed the man's gun,

twisting it in his hand, pivoting it so it spun around to point its barrel in the face of the shooter.

The man crumpled under the blast of his own gun. Zekk turned the corner and charged down the corridor just as his pursuer was catching up. He knew he was just one dash away from the captain's cabin, and he made the final turn fully expecting there to be at least one more guard waiting for him.

Sure enough, there was. The guard, though, wasn't expecting Zekk to jump high in the air and use the Force to swing himself around the corner so he slammed into the Nikto, feet smashing face, and knocked him to the deck.

Zekk pumped one stun shot into his gut to be sure, then threw himself against the door to the captain's cabin. More guards would be here any minute and he reached out with the Force, felt the locks and mechanisms of the door, felt the empty room inside.

Well, hopefully the captain had an art collection inside he'd really want to negotiate over.

Zekk found the locks, flipped them open, and pulled the door to the side. Stun blasts lanced past his back as he slipped through the opening, then slid the door shut behind him and latched the locks tightly into place. Then, for good measure, he snapped the mechanisms, sealing himself safely inside.

He breathed a sigh of relief, then turned around.

A man was in the middle of the room, staring at him with a faint smile.

Zekk snapped his pistol up and pointed it at the man's chest. He was human, tall, at the point in middle age where his midsection was getting thick and bits of gray streaked through his red-brown hair and beard. His eyes were a blue-gray, and they were curious rather than frightened.

Zekk stretched out with the Force to feel the captain's intentions. He couldn't sense him at all.

"Who are you?" he snapped. "What are you?"

The man sighed and raised his hands in the air. "I'm impressed. You know, deep down I think I *wanted* you to try to escape. I've heard so much about you Jedi but I've never seen one in action. To get this far, you've lived up to your reputation. By the way, did you kill any of my crew?"

"No. And I won't kill you, not if you don't make me."

"Hmmm. So you're merciful types too. Do you have your word, as a Jedi?"

"Of course. I don't kill anyone unless I have to. I promise."

"All right, then. I'll hold you to that, Jedi."

"Are you this ship's captain?"

"Evan Praelyx of the *Wayward Soldier*, if you were wondering." His lips slanted in a grin. "Come on, Jedi. Go ahead and ask. I'm sure you're dying to know."

Even though he had the blaster in his hand, Zekk was getting increasingly convinced that he wasn't the one in charge of this conversation. He half-stuttered out, "Why can't I feel you in the Force?"

"Well, there's only a few possible explanations for that," Praelyx said easily.

"Are you a human replica droid?" Zekk asked, dreading and disbelieving any other option.

Praelyx shook his head. "It would be best just to show you, but first, I want to remind you of the promise you made a minute ago."

Zekk nodded, tightened his grip on the pistol, and braced himself. Praelyx reached one hand to the back of his head, down to the base of his neck, where Zekk couldn't see it. Then a straight line appeared down the

middle of his face. Then his face itself seemed to peel apart, skin and hair retreating to the sides of his head before slinking down beneath the collar of his loose cloak.

The face beneath the face had a sloping forehead, no nostrils, thin lips bearing jagged teeth, and dark-gray skin pocked by curling tattoos and a few old scars.

It had been a very long time since Zekk had stood face-to-face with a Yuuzhan Vong, but it hadn't been long enough.

"So," the creature said, deadpan, "You probably have questions."

The voice was the same perfect accent-less Basic that had come from the red-bearded human's mouth. That only made things more surreal. The first thing to come from Zekk's mouth was, "Your crew, do they know?"

"All my officers do, yes."

"And this ship, the...."

"*Wayward Soldier*."

"What is it? Are you pirates? Privateers? Mercenaries?"

"We've been all three over the years." The Yuuzhan Vong walked casually over to the nearest sofa and sat down.

For the first time Zekk looked at the room around him. He noticed a few collectibles: a gilt-framed mirror on one wall, some Mon Cal art sculpture on another. And there was the sofa, a chair, a holo-projector, a table and a kitchen. It was all appallingly *normal*.

"Have you been running around like this since the end of the war? For ten years?"

"More or less." The Yuuzhan Vong crossed one leg over the other and leaned back on his sofa. "I became Evan Praelyx after my ship crashed on the planet Nar Haaska."

"Hutt space?" Zekk sidestepped to look at the Vong head-on but didn't lower his pistol.

"Oh, yes," the creature nodded casually. "The Hutts put up a much better fight that was expected. The point is, my ship crashed, and I was the only survivor. Thankfully I had an ooglith masquer on me, and I was able to blend in with all the other mercenaries the Hutts had hired to defend their territory."

"And you've been wearing this masquer for over a decade?"

"Not the same one, but there are still worlds in this galaxy where Yuuzhan Vong life thrives. Even ones where masquers grow."

"You want me to believe you just slapped on a masquer and became a whole new being? No thanks, I'm not buying it. I know what you people are. You killed so many friends I lost count. You're fanatics, you're--"

The Vong waved a hand dismissively. "Butchers, monsters, I know. But that was a long time ago."

"You're trying to tell me, what, a Vong can change?"

"You can clearly see I have. And to be frank, by the time I crashed on Nar Haaska my.... faith had begun to waver."

He spoke so plainly, so casually, like the rough-edged mercenary spacer he claimed to be. Zekk lowered his weapon a little bit and asked, "What were you before, really? What caste were you?"

"I was an intendant. If you're truly curious, my name was Yoshak Skell, though I doubt you've heard of me. I was never... important."

"I'm finding it kind of hard to imagine. Okay, maybe you weren't a warrior or a priest, but I still can't think of many Vong who'd just walk away from everything like that."

“You’re right. That’s why they lost the war.”

He lowered his pistol a little more. “They? Not *we*?”

Praelyx, or Yoshak Skell or whatever he was, heaved a very human sigh. “If I truly considered myself Yuuzhan Vong I would have joined them in exile on Zonama Sekot. As you can see, I haven’t, just like I haven’t launched myself into a one-man campaign against the complacent infidels.

“The intendant caste always had to deal with the dirty underside of managing an empire, even more than the Workers and the Shamed, because we worked in the places where ideals of the Gods clashed with the real universe.”

Zekk’s thoughts flashed back to Nom Anor, who’d harassed the strike team at Myrkr and helped Vergere captain Jacen. Nom Anor had been an intendant, and by all accounts an agnostic one loyal only to himself who, after falling from grace, had made himself prophet for the Vong’s shamed under-castes, in effect bringing down his own civilization through his self-serving schemes. In the last battle of the war he’d even sided with the Jedi- again for his own selfish reasons.

Still, Zekk found Evan Praelyx hard to believe.

“So, you don’t believe in your gods? Not Yun-Yammka, Yun-Yuuzhan, Yun-Harla?”

He sighed again. “Perhaps they do exist, but if they do, they clearly haven’t thought to punish me for abandoning them.”

This whole conversation bordered on the surreal, but as he looked around at this so-ordinary cabin, Zekk found he had no choice but to believe it. He lowered his pistol and remembered what he’d come to ask in the first place.

“Why did you capture me? Why am I here?”

"We were hiding in the Transitory Mists, watching the battle, hoping we could gleam some information, maybe, or recover some ships for scrap."

"You're scavengers."

"Waste not, want not, Jedi. But when we went sifting through the debris right after the battle we found you. At first you didn't look like much, but then Harn peeled you out of your flight suit and found that light-saber of yours."

"Where is it?"

"Nowhere you can get to. The point is, once we learned we had a Jedi onboard, well, then we had to decide what to do with you."

"You don't get to decide. *I* get to decide." He raised the pistol again. "Let me off this ship so I can get back to the Jedi. If you want, I'll give you my word that I won't tell anyone where I was or who you are."

"Hmmm... You know, I would consider your offer, but I just got a better one earlier today."

"What? What offer?"

"A job offer. *Wayward Soldier* has a new mission, and just before I get it, a Jedi drops into my lap." The Yuuzhan Vong grinned. "Perhaps the gods smile on me after all."

What *kind* of job?" Zekk growled and wagged his pistol, though it felt increasingly useless in his hand.

"The good old-fashioned kind that got me this ship in the first place. Piracy."

"And what are you going to pirate?"

Praelyx leaned forward and grinned a toothy Yuuzhan Vong grin. "The real question, Jedi, is from *whom*. The answer, as it turns out, is another old enemy of your kind. So perhaps this mission will be to your liking as well as mine."

"What are you talking about?"

“You can’t guess? We’re going to break into a star destroyer and steal from the Empire. And you’re going to help us.”

Zekk stared. His jaw went slack. His weapon, forgotten, fell to his side.

“Yes,” smiled Praelyx, “You are.”

PART II
OATHBREAKERS

CHAPTER 13

“Okay,” Zekk said, “Run this by me again.”

“Not a problem,” said Praelyx. The two of them stood on *Wayward Soldier*’s bridge, looking out at the flash of hyperspace as the gunship’s crew made last-minute checks in preparation for their entrance into realspace. The Yuuzhan Vong captain wore his oogloth masquer once again, and to all his crew looked the perfect image of a slightly-scruffy, still-energetic middle-aged human space pirate.

“First,” Praelyx said, holding up a finger, “We’re going to drop out of realspace in the Corellian system, right on top of Selonia.”

“Where, apparently, Imperials ships, Alliance ships, Confederate ships, and who-knows-what-else are all going to be sitting in orbit while their leaders are down on the planet for the peace talks.”

Praelyx frowned. “If you know all this already, why did you ask to hear it again?”

“Why are they having it at Selonia? Why not, I don’t know, Corellia or Coruscant or some place else?”

“Well, this whole mess started in the Corellian system, if you recall. Selonia itself, though, declared itself independent from the Sal-Solo and Gejjen governments and basically stayed neutral through the

whole thing, which sets it up as a good symbolic place to end the war.”

“When did you end up a keen observer of galactic politics? Before or after you changed faces?”

“Before,” Praelyx said casually. “I was an executor. It was my job to learn as much as I could about your people.”

“Okay, then. So we drop out of hyperspace over Selonía. Then, apparently, we use this one little gunship to board an Imperial star destroyer, steal some stuff, then run.”

“Like I said, you seem to have all this well in hand.”

“*How* do we board this star destroyer?”

“I’ve acquired some vacuum-proof thrust-capsules usually used for bore-mining into planet’s crusts. It will be more than sufficient to burn through the hull of a star destroyer.”

“I suppose you’ll drop the mining capsule exactly where it needs to be to get the goods fast.”

“That’s right.”

“And what does this gunship do the whole time?”

“Holds right up close to the destroyer. They won’t risk firing on us or they might damage themselves. Same goes for any support ships nearby.”

Zekk sighed. “And it doesn’t bother you that this is probably going to start an interstellar incident and maybe even ruin peace talks and restart the whole damned war?”

“Why would it restart the war?” Praelyx asked innocently.

Zekk glared at him. “You know why. An Alliance-made gunship smashes against an Imperial destroyer, sends boarders inside, steals some stuff and probably kills a whole lot of people in the process. But sure, they’ll just sweep it under the rug.”

“Actually, I think they will. The Imps won’t want to advertise that they got their destroyer broken into and they certainly won’t want to talk about *what* we stole, because *that* would definitely derail the peace talks.”

Skeptical, Zekk asked, “What about all the people that are going to end up dead?”

Praelyx grinned and patted him on the shoulder. “That, my Jedi friend, is where you come in. You expertly proved your ability to infiltrate hostile ships and reach your objective without taking lives. You want to avoid killing at all costs and, furthermore, you want to keep blood off the scales and prevent the war from restarting over our little raid. And that is why you’re going to volunteer to go with the boarding party.”

Zekk stared. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m dead serious,” he said, still smiling.

“How do you know I won’t just run?”

“Run where? You’re on an *Imperial* ship, Jedi. They don’t take kindly to your type, by and large.”

“Neither did yours,” Zekk glowered.

“My ‘kind’ is the crew of this ship, Jedi. Nothing more, nothing less. And nothing that happened before matters.”

“You can’t expect me to believe that. Everything your people did, everything you used to believe-”

“The past,” said Praelyx, “Is the past. Tell me, Jedi, why do you want to get back to your ‘kind’ so badly? And don’t just tell me it’s your duty. You’re not a damned droid following a program. Why do you *really* want to go back? Is there something, or *someone*?”

Zekk stared at the captain’s green eyes, so human yet so alien, and didn’t know what to say. He didn’t even have an answer. After chasing Jaina for so long- after trying to make up for the time he’d failed her when

she'd needed him- he'd finally found it within him to give her up. And without her, he couldn't think of any single person he really wanted to be with among the Jedi. Not like he'd wanted to be with Jaina.

But he could never tell this Yuuzhan Vong that. He just stiffened and said, "I am a Jedi. That's reason enough."

Praelyx shook his head. "Just because you're something once doesn't mean you have to stay that thing forever."

Before Zekk could respond, Chazdrul Harn called from the navigation station, saying, "Five minutes until Selonia."

Praelyx kept his eyes on Zekk. "Well, what do you say, Jedi? Do you want to stand back and watch a lot of people die, or do you want to do something to help?"

Zekk scowled. "Will you give me my lightsaber back?"

"I'm optimistic, not a fool." Praelyx reached for his belt and pulled a blaster pistol from his holster. It was a well-worn model, with a leather-padded handgrip worn smooth from use.

He handed it to Zekk, butt-first, and said, "Take care of this. I want it back."

Zekk carefully took the pistol and checked it gas pack. Fully charged. It was currently set to *kill*.

He looked at Praelyx and Praelyx looked at him, and he didn't need the Force to know that every single being on the bridge was watching them.

Zekk switched the pistol to *stun* and stuffed it into his waistband. "All right," he said, "I'll bring it back, on one condition."

"Of course."

"Once this raid is over, you tell me why we're doing this, what this is all about."

"You'd take my word on that?"

"It's better than nothing."

Praelyx snorted. "All right, Jedi. I promise. You have my word."

"I'll hold you to that." Zekk adjusted the weapon at his belt. "Okay. I'm ready."

He barely made it the mining capsule before *Wayward Solder* popped out of hyperspace. When it did, he found himself pressed against one transparisteel porthole of the jam-packed capsule, looking out at Selonia and all the mighty ships arrayed in orbit.

The being crammed next to him, a short and stock Snivvian, asked, "You ever boarded a star destroyer, Jedi?"

"No."

The creature sniffed as though disappointed and licked his jutting canines. "First time for everything then."

"Yes."

"Just so you know, if you look like you're gonna try to bolt or turn on us, I'll shoot you dead."

"Great."

"You say more than one word at a time?"

"Sometimes."

The Snivvian snorted again but this time he sounded amused. Zekk kept his face planted against the porthole as they tumbled toward Selonia. He still couldn't see what star destroyer they were supposed to be crashing into but at this point nobody had fired on them- yet.

Then *Wayward Solder* kicked in its retro-thrusters and spun. Zekk's head nearly smashed against the wall as the view from the porthole swept to one side; the great white superstructure of a star destroyer's command toward flashed into view and was replaced by Selonia's nightside just as fast.

A horrible screeching sound filled the capsule. Red sparks, dying quickly in the vacuum, jumped past Zekk's viewport and he realized someone had fired the mining capsule's borer and was tearing into the destroyer's hull.

From the back someone yelled, "Get ready to pop!" and a second later Zekk's ears did just that. The rest of the capsule's motley assault crew hefted their weapons and began surging for the airlock as it opened.

Once it did, Zekk was swept away in the tide of moving bodies as they spilled into the destroyer's hallways. Before he could even get his bearings somebody grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around, and stuffed a portable gas-mask in his face.

The man, some part-human part-alien hybrid with blue skin and flaming red hair, was already wearing his. He said, "Get it on, Jedi, and do your thing. Do it now."

Zekk started to say "What is it for?" but he got his answer before the words could spill out, and it was an answer he should have seen coming. He heard two explosions from either end of the corridor: not the thunder of a grenade or thermal detonator but the popping of two pressured capsules.

As he strapped the mask over his mouth Zekk asked, "What's in those? Is it poison?"

"Won't kill 'em, but it'll knock 'em out. Like the boss probably told you, he wants to get through this thing without killing."

Zekk scowled under his mask. "Is Praelyx usually this accommodating?"

"Only if it's in the contract."

"Hey, Harkum!" a voice called, "Let's go!"

"You heard 'im, let's go, Jedi." The half-breed checked the charge on his rifle and waved a trio of

Rodians forward. Zekk followed, but he didn't get far before he heard the sound of laserfire around the corner and down the hallway.

"Those stormtroopers aren't going to be shooting stun," Zekk reminded the half-breed.

"That's where you come in, Jedi. Do your thing." He shoved Zekk forward.

The Jedi grimaced and shouldered his way to the place where the Rodians were taking cover behind a couple armored supply crates. Zekk kept himself fully behind the corner of the wall and reached out with the Force to feel the enemy firing at them. He sensed a mix of determination, anger, and frank confusion from a half-dozen troopers; further away, he sensed more coming to their aid. As for how fast the sleeping gas was spreading, he had no way to know, not when all of Praelyx's raiders were masked and immune to its effects.

He knew they wouldn't have much time. Zekk waited a moment more, long enough to get a sense of where the stormtroopers were positioned and when they popped out to exchange fire with the hiding Rodians.

When the time was right, Zekk stepped around the corner and instantly shot off two stun blasts. Each one hit a stormtrooper in the armored chest and sent him clattering to the deck.

He ducked back under cover. The half-breed growled in his ear, "Can't you do better than that? They have to have backup coming."

"They do. I bet at least a squad."

The man frowned. "When do they get here?"

"I don't know. Soon. Hold on."

Zekk popped around the corner and hit another stormtrooper. At the same time, one of the Rodians landed a good shot and took another trooper down.

As he went back behind the corner Zekk gave Harkum and angry smile. "Better?"

Then one of the Rodians shouted "Grenade!" and Zekk heard the clack of metal hitting metal. He saw the Rodians scramble back down the hall, almost tripping over the little sphere on the deck.

Zekk grabbed it with the Force and sent it hurling back down the hall.

The explosion rocked the entire deck. Zekk immediately turned the corner and fired shots into the scorched and smoking hallway. He heard the clatter of two more bodies falling and knew it was over.

"Okay!" he called, "Let's go!"

The Rodians fell in behind him; so did Harkum, the Snivvian, and the rest of Praelyx's raiders. The grenade had imploded in the center of the hallway, rending deck plates and choking the entire passage with black smoke that stung Zekk's eyes but thankfully didn't fill his lungs.

"When is that sleeping gas going to work?" he snapped to Harkum.

"Any time, any time," the half-breed grunted. When they got to the point where the hallway branched he waved the Rodians to the left; a trio of humans followed but the rest of the group halted at the intersection.

"What happens next?" asked Zekk as he checked his pistol, still well-charged.

"Neevo's boys are getting the package. Where are those stormies?"

Zekk paused and tried to find the reinforcements. "They're close. I can't tell which direction, but they're out there."

"Great," Harkum sighed and waved to the Snivvian. "Got one more?"

The alien snorted and held up a cannister of what must have been more sleeping gas. "Got it right here."

"Good. Get ready to let it rip." Harkum looked back at Zekk. "Any clue?"

"I think they're coming by lift... Maybe... Down that hall." He pointed to the right.

"Then we'll head 'em off before they get here. Gorlum, c'mon!"

He waved the Snivvian forward and both dashed to the right. Zekk stayed where he was, feeling hopefully confused and awkward amidst so many mercenaries who stared at him with blatant mistrust. He might have even knocked some of them out during his escape from his cell, he wasn't sure.

Harkum and Gorlum were not gone long. He heard and felt another explosion, this one the definite thunder of a grenade, and a second later the half-breed and the Snivvian came racing back.

"Busted the lift tube," Harkum said. "Should hold 'em for a little longer. What else do you feel, Jedi?"

Zekk reached out with the Force again and tried to sense what else was happening. By now the entire ship was probably alert to their intrusion and there was simply no telling how much time they had until dozens of stormtroopers found an alternate route and caught them in a crossfire.

He tried to find the Rodians and their human partners. He thought he sensed them, engaged in some strenuous firefight.

"It's Neevo," Zekk said. "I think he's in trouble."

"All right, Jedi, you're with me. Gorlum, keep everybody else here. Give me that cannister."

The Snivvian did so. Zekk followed Harkum down the left hallway. They wound down two corners until they found the Rodians and the humans pinned down at

the end of a third, peeking over the edge and exchanging blue stun blasts for red kill shots.

"What can you give us, Jedi?" One Rodian's snout twitched.

"Kark the Jedi, I've got something better," Harkum said. He flipped a switch on the cannister and tossed it down the hall. Zekk could hear the pop of compressed gas and waited for the enemy fire to stop.

When it didn't recede right away he glared at Harkum in accusation, but before he could think of anything to say he felt the stormtrooper's awarenesses grow vague, as though they really were falling asleep.

The enemy fire dropped to nothing. Whooping happily, the Rodians led the final charge down the hall. Zekk, Harkum, and the others followed, and the Jedi ran all the way to the far end just to make sure the stormtroopers had been rendered unconscious rather than killed.

He jogged back to the group to find the Rodians trying to work the access panel to a door. Harkum fixed his eyes on Zekk and said, "Like I told you, the boss follows his contract to the letter."

"And if it wasn't in his contract?"

The half-breed shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he'd still do it out of the kindness of his heart."

The pirates were all focused on the door right in front of then, and Zekk realized that if he wanted to run somewhere he could, but there wasn't any point. There was no place to run, just as Praelyx had said. Even if he tried to surrender to some stormtroopers, odds were about even that they'd shoot him dead anyway out of spite or confusion.

So he cleared his throat and said, "Let me have a look at that."

The Rodians shuffled aside obligingly. Zekk stood square in front of the door and places both hands on its cold durasteel face. He felt out with the Force to sense its locks and mechanisms. These were far more complex than what Praelyx had aboard his ship. Whatever lay beyond the door must have been valuable.

Zekk scowled and looked back at Harkum. "I'm not sure if I can do this. It's not like the doors on your ship."

One of the Rodians said, "That encryption is something else. We could crack it, but I don't think we have the time."

Harkum's blue face twisted in a scowl. He looked at Zekk, then the Rodians, then the door, then cycled through all three again before he reached inside his jacket pocket and, after one second's hesitation, drew out a silver metal cylinder.

He held it out to Zekk stared at his lightsaber.

"You had it all this time?" the Jedi gaped.

Harkum shrugged. "The boss said to save it for an emergency."

Zekk took it. The blue saber blazed to life in his hand. The pirates around him jerked back in fright, all except Harkum.

"Well?" He arched a red eyebrow. "What are you gonna slice open? Me or the door?"

He wondered if the time would come when he'd have to slice through Harkum. He wondered if it was just minutes away.

But it wasn't here. Not yet

He spun on his heel and thrust the blade through the door. Metal melted around the superheated saber and he moved it in a broad circuit around the door's edges. When he'd completed the circle he pulled out the lightsaber and glanced at the pirates all around him.

“Ready?” he asked.

Harkum and the others hefted their blasters to firing position. Whatever was inside, they clearly expected armed resistance, though all Zekk could sense through the Force was maybe one frightened being.

“Do it,” Harkum snarled.

Zekk gave the door one strong shove with the Force, knocking it through the gap and sending it clattering on the floor of the room beyond. As soon as it fell, the Rodians and the three humans charged straight in. Harkum grabbed Zekk’s arm, pulling him aside before he could get a good look inside the room.

He heard a short burst of blasterfire, then silence. A moment later, two big humans came through the scorched-open door, dragging a man in loose blue cloth pajamas between them.

“This is a kidnapping?” Zekk gaped. “I thought you were pirates.”

“Kidnapping is a form a piracy. Say hello to Moff Kosimo Westermal.” Harkum roughly grabbed the man by his hair and tilted his head up. Zekk looked down at the face of a middle-aged human gone slack and unconscious from the stun bolt.

“We’re kidnapping a *moff*?”

Harkum pointed down the hall and the humans started dragging him as fast as they could. The Rodians fell in front, weapons raised, guiding them back toward the mining capsule.

“Don’t feel too bad for him,” Harkum grunted as he and Zekk fell in behind them.

“I’m not, but your *boss* told me we’re trying *not* to completely tank these peace talks.”

“Oh, what’s one moff more or less?”

For a second Zekk wondered if he should try and free Westermal and deliver him back to his men. With the

lightsaber he just might be able to do it, and a grateful Westermal might just be willing to let him go free or outright return him to the Jedi.

But whatever was happening, someone more than Praelyx was behind it. Turning Westermal loose and running would mean turning Praelyx loose too, and there was no telling what his paymaster was up to and when they'd strike again.

The only sure course seemed to be to stay with *Wayward Soldier*, wherever it took him.

They rejoined the Snivvian and the rest of the team at the intersection and hurried their way back toward the place where the mining capsule had burned a hole through the destroyer's hull. Zekk heard the sound of blasterfire as they approached and was unsurprised to find a pair of defenders at the mouth of the portal crouched behind cover and exchanging fire with a group of stormtroopers down the hall.

"What happened to that sleeping gas?" Zekk grunted to Harkum.

The half-breed did another of those shrugs. "Well, they've got helmets. Can probably stick in air filters if they want."

"Lovely."

"They're laying down some fierce fire, Jedi. You really good with that lasersword?"

"Lightsaber."

"Whatever. You've got it. Use it if you can."

Zekk wanted to snap at him but he was right. He edged his way to the front of the group and gestured for the Rodians gunmen up front to stand back.

"Don't shoot me," he told them, and charged around the corner.

His lightsaber immediately caught a pair of laser blasts and reflected them into the wall. The storm-

troopers at the far end concentrated their fire on him and he batted back a few more shots as he ran. He turned himself into a jump, somersaulting over the crouching pirates and turning himself into a human missile flying boots-first at the stormtroopers.

He slammed into one trooper chest-first and unleashed a wave of kinetic Force energy that knocked the other troopers back. He spun a full circle on one heel, weaving his saber up and down in fast-undulating waves to shear off the muzzles of two E-11 blaster rifles and one DL-22 pistol. Then he brought his free leg up and kicked a stormtrooper in the gut, sending him hard against a wall. Another stormtrooper got his rifle up just in time for Zekk to slice it in half; then he dropped, rolled, and came up behind the white-armored troopers. He used the Force to pull the stormtrooper against his chest and pin him there; the other troopers still standing hesitated long enough for the pirates on the far side of the hall to pepper them with stun bolts. They dropped as one, and a second later a sole laser blast shot down the hall and nailed the captive soldier too.

Zekk dropped the limp body and looked down the hall. The pirates were dragging the captive Moff through the portal while Harkum stood in front. He caught Zekk's eye from the distance, blew twirling smoke from the tip of his blaster, and winked.

Zekk shook his head, killed his lightsaber, and ran to join them.

By the time he crammed aboard Harkum was already on the comm line, probably relaying the good news to Praelyx. As soon as Zekk was through, the Rodians started closing the portal. It sealed and, a few seconds later, a series of charges along the mine capsule's rim kicked them away from the destroyed. It occurred to

Zekk that the hallway must be suddenly open to the void, and that all those soldiers he'd gone through such an elaborate dance to keep from killing were even now probably being sucked into the void.

It made him sick, but the rest of the pirates seemed quite pleased with themselves. A few of them were playing with the unconscious Moff, slapping his face, tugging his cheeks to stretch it into weird expressions.

Zekk kept staring out the portal. He watched the destroyer fall away and Selonion too. *Wayward Soldier* must have had them in a tractor beam because they were rapidly climbing out of the planet's orbit. He realized that, too, Praelyx must have sent out a broadcast to all ships proclaiming that he'd taken Moff Westermal captive and warning against anyone who might fire on his fleeing gunship.

All in all, it had been as skillful a kidnapping as Zekk could have imagined. He felt the capsule shudder, presumably as it locked into *Wayward Soldier's* docking clamp. A few seconds after that stars all blurred into hyperspace, whisking these pirates and their captive to safety and taking Zekk further away from any hope of escape.

The thought filled him with a wash of dread. It was a critical distraction that dulled his Force-awareness. In the jostle of bodies crammed into the capsule, he didn't notice when the tip of a blaster-pistol tapped the small of his back. He only sensed one brief second of ill intention, right before the stun blast surged through his body and dropped him fully into darkness.

Chazdrul Harn hadn't directly participated in the boarding of the star destroyer *Golden Fortress*. He'd never been one for running and gunning, but Baragwin usually weren't. Big, slow-moving beings that they

were, they usually made tempting targets and blocked the hallway besides.

Standing on the gunship's bridge with Praelyx while the assault went down was enough action. From their position nestled right against the destroyer's command tower, they'd been subject to a constant stream of comm hails broadcasting everything from threats to confused queries to, memorably, a plea by a Hutt-owned Confederation ship to blow the whole destroyer to hell. *Fortress'* own wing of TIE fighters and bombers had flown a tight circle around the gunship and tower both in an obvious attempt at intimidation, but Harn and Praelyx had both known they wouldn't fire.

After they made it clear they had Moff Westermal aboard, their escape was more or less assured. Still, once they streaked into hyperspace and left Selonia far behind, Harn found himself weary with relief.

While Harn ran post-combat system checks on the bridge, Praelyx went down to make sure that their Jedi helped was incapacitated and returned to cell. When all of that was accomplished, he and Harn both rendezvoused in the captain's cabin.

"A toast, my friend, to wonders of the Jedi," Praelyx grinned over a raised glass of Iomin-ale.

Harn gave one of his customary skeptical snorts, the kind Harkum had once said could rattle the walls of a cheap home. He knew what Praelyx was and had known for years, and while he normally was able to mentally separate what his boss was now from what he'd once been, it was hard when the subject turned to the Force-users.

"I always thought the Jedi stories were just stories," the Baragwin admitted as he stood over Praelyx's table.

"If they were just stories, they wouldn't have made themselves so many enemies," Praelyx pointed out casually, as though his old clan hadn't tried to drive them to extinction.

"He was good in today's fight," Harn admitted, "But what do you want to *do* with him? We can't just keep a pet Jedi aboard. He's already proved he can get out of his cage."

He added the last bit darkly; the two of them had already had a row over the Jedi's escape and confrontation in with the captain. They'd been lurking in the Transitory Mists hoping to pick up scrap and salvage, but when they'd stumbled upon a Jedi, Praelyx had insisted they keep him and nurse him back to health. Frankly, if he'd been in charge, Harn would have just left the human to die in space. Keeping him had more risk than potential reward as Harn saw it, and he was starting to wonder if Praelyx's Yuuzhan Vong side, the part the captain tried to keep hidden from everyone including himself, wasn't being drawn to the surface by the damned Force-user.

Praelyx drummed his free hand on the tabletop. "Jedi have all sorts of skills. He might be able to help us with our new guest."

"I thought you wanted to let Harkum have a piece of him first."

"I do. But the Imperials train their people to resist torture. Consider the Jedi a backup plan."

Harn snorted again. "What happens if he refuses to *be* our backup plan?"

"I think he will. I've been scanning the news-nets, trying to piece together more about this Jedi. I've discovered that he is, in fact, a close friend of the Hapan queen."

That got Harn's attention. "Really?"

“Really. I think we can use that.”

Harn looked down at the second glass of lomin-ale on the table and wrapped a claw around it. “I think you’re right.”

“Cheers,” Praelyx toasted a second time, and this time his first officer toasted back.

CHAPTER 14

It was a few days' ride to Euceron and not a big ship, which meant that Tahiri had two options: lock herself in her cramped guests' cabin and never come out, or take some time to talk with the two beings with whom she'd just entrusted her mission, her life, and a considerable amount of credits.

She wasn't in the mood to make new friends, but she recognized the latter choice was still smarter, so she made an effort to be present in *Mandala's* central crew lounge. Captain Muro gave her a wide berth at first, but the co-pilot, Vjarna, was a bit more forthcoming.

Apparently Muro had already filled the little Bimm in on Tahiri's true identity, because the first thing Vjarna asked once they were through with basic pleasantries was, "Do you still have your lightsaber? I've never seen one."

"I do have it." Tahiri felt defensive and she wasn't sure why. "It's some place safe."

"I'm not going to try and steal it," Vjarna chuckled. "I'm sure I could get a good price for it, but I'm not that greedy."

"I didn't mean to imply that!" Tahiri said at once. She'd more or less forgotten the stereotype of Bimms as greedy haggling traders.

Vjarna, though, took it with good humor. "Don't worry, Jedi, I don't mind."

"I'm not a Jedi," Tahiri shook her head. "So please don't call me that."

"Then what are you? You still have your lightsaber and you still use the Force, right?"

"That's right." She'd forgotten that Bimm considered Jedi to be something like folk heroes and tended to be abnormally up on Force-user affairs. It was surprising, then, that he didn't seem to have heard of her. Maybe he was pretending, out of politeness.

Vjarna went on, "So what you're saying is, you're not working for Luke Skywalker."

"No, I'm not working for him. I'm not working for anyone."

"So you just hired us to take you to some Vong-formed planet for kicks? Or were you getting nostalgic for the last war, because I never thought that was possible."

"Trust me, I'm not nostalgic for it. At all."

As soon as she said it she knew it wasn't true, not exactly. The war had been awful in so many ways for a few brief, shining months she'd been together with Anakin, and their new love had managed to outshine all the darkness of the invasion they'd been fighting. She'd been trying to get back to that light for years since, and only gotten further away.

"This isn't about nostalgia," she repeated, because in this case, at least, it was true. "The worlds they left behind have been filled with all sorts of Vongformed life and technology. Some of it's been cataloged and surveyed. Some of its been removed, especially on planets like Coruscant."

"But nobody cared enough about Euceron to heal it," the Bimm nodded. "I understand completely. The

Vong took Bimmisaari too, you know. First they just enslaved us, but then they tried bringing in all their strange plants and animals. They didn't get that far before the war ended, but it was still enough to mess up the continent I was born in. The Alliance put together reclamation teams to strip away Vongformed life after the War, but like you said, it mostly went to planets like Coruscant, Brentaal, Commenor. Places people care about."

"So you're saying you can't go home again?"

"No," Vjarna shook his head. "But who can?"

Tahiri swallowed. "So is that why you ended up a spacer? Because the Yuuzhan Vong ruined your home?"

"I was a refugee. I had to work to survive. And it wasn't easy." Vjarna added a smile that lightened his tone. "I got lucky though, when I ended up with Rahley."

"How long have you and she been partners?"

The Bimm screwed up his face in thought. "Must be... Eight years now."

"That's a good partnership." Tahiri tried to remember if she'd stayed at any place with any group of people for that long. She couldn't come up with anything.

"She was generous. Gave me fifty percent of the earnings from the get-go even though were using her ship and her supplies. Most captains aren't like that. She's a good woman, Rahley."

Tahiri hummed agreement, but it was hard for her to feel much warmth for the captain. The older woman seemed to be doing her best to avoid Tahiri, and they hadn't had a long conversation since their first sit-down at Junction Station.

Tahiri found that she needed to rectify that, all the more once she and Vjarna started developing a minor

repose. The Bimm was talkative and non-judgmental, and his ignorance of anything related to galactic politics was frankly refreshing. With Rahley Muro, though, Tahiri constantly felt like she was being judged, and she had no idea if she actually *was* being judged of if it was just another case of an overactive conscience.

Since Muro wasn't going to force anything, Tahiri decided she had to instead. She waited until Muro was alone in the ship's cockpit, running checks on the navigation computer from the pilot's seat. The co-pilot's spot beside her was too small for Tahiri to fit into so she settled with leaning casually against the curved frame of the cockpit door. Muro, though, was concentrating on her work and didn't seem to notice, and Tahiri found herself awkwardly frozen in place, uncertain of what to say but unwilling to retreat.

Finally, Muro looked over her shoulder and asked in an unsurprised voice, "Do you need something?"

"No. Well, nothing immediate. I just wanted to say something, if you weren't too busy."

Muro leaned back in her chair and swiveled it around to face Tahiri head-on. "I suppose not. What's on your mind?"

"I just wanted to assure you that I'd never do anything to put your ship in danger. When we get to Euceron, we can scan the planet for low orbit. Once I find what I'm looking for you can even drop me to the surface in an escape pod."

"Do you think I'm scared of the planet just because it has Vonglife on it?"

She frowned faintly offended, and Tahiri was amazed at her own ability to mess things up so fast.

"I didn't mean to suggest that. I just wanted to assure you that there's no reason to worry about your own safety on this mission. I'll be the only one going down

to the surface. I'll be the one taking risks. If you think your ship really is in danger, feel free to run."

"And leave you behind?"

"That's right. I'll transfer all the funds for the first half of the trip in advance."

"Miss Veila, are you asking to be abandoned?"

"No, I'm not." She waved her hands and wondered what other ways she'd find to muck this conversation up. "I'm just saying that I don't want to risk you and Vjarna. I've put too many people in danger already and I don't want to be responsible for anyone else getting hurt."

Muro's expression softened a little. "I can appreciate that. All right. If things look dire I'll leave you to die. But if they *don't* I'll stay and pick up the second half of my payment."

"Of course." Tahiri smiled a little. Muro didn't return it, but her expression relaxed.

"Is there anything else?" the older woman asked.

Tahiri stuffed her hands in her pockets. "I was just wondering what you could tell me about this ship."

"Are you curious?"

"I am. It reminds me of... a friend's ship. It looks like it's seen a lot of work. Vjarna said he joined you eight years ago. Did you have a co-pilot before then?"

"I ran through a bunch of short-term ones after the Vong War. Some flaked out on me and left, and a couple I had to fire. None of them were very good. But Vjarna, I could tell he was serious. He wanted to work and he knew how, and he didn't have any place else to be."

"Is that why you offered him a fifty percent cut up front?"

Muro smiled a little. "It was actually forty-five percent. Revli's just being kind."

"How long have you had this ship?"

"Oh, about... Seventeen years now."

"That's quite a while."

"Well, it wasn't *my* ship." She paused. "I started out in the co-pilot's seat. Not Revli's seat, obviously, but a co-pilot's seat. *Mandala* ended up being an... inheritance."

"What happened to its original owner?" Tahiri asked, though she already had a guess.

"He was killed in the Vong War. Close to the end, at Lantilles." She paused, looked down, and added, "He was my husband."

"Oh." Tahiri said. "I'm so sorry."

"He died long time ago."

So had Anakin, but time didn't matter, not when it was someone you loved. "I'm still sorry. If I'd have known that, I wouldn't have—"

"Wouldn't have asked me to take you to a Vong-formed planet?" Muro looked up at her. "Miss Veila, I was the one who answered your advertisement. I have no problem with this mission. And frankly, if I get the excuse to blast some Vong hold-outs, so much the better."

"Oh. Well, okay then."

Muro shifted in her chair. "Vengeance isn't supposed to be a Jedi trait, is it?"

"Not particularly."

"Well," she said, "I'm glad I'm not a Jedi."

There wasn't much to say after that. Tahiri slunk out of the cockpit and Muro went back to checking the nav computer. As she walked down the halls, tracing her fingers along the curved corridors so like the *Falcon's*, Tahiri found herself wondering what this kind of life could have been like, free from responsibility to the Jedi Order, the Alliance, the well-being of the greater

galaxy, going wherever she pleased and living only for herself.

To her surprise, she found herself envying Rahley Muro. She didn't know what that meant for her going forward, but it was something to think about.

Tahiri had been so many things in her life- Tusken, Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong, Sith- but she couldn't think of a time when she'd truly felt *free*.

CHAPTER 15

In her long career in service to the royal house of Hapes, Taryn Zel had been to all sixty-three worlds in the Consortium and plenty outside. She'd always been rather fond of Gallinore, which made this current trip all the more disconcerting.

The planet itself was famed for its carefully maintained landscapes of forests and fields and lush vegetation. Even its settlements were constructed of green marble; the city streets were lines with tall trees and spotted with manicured gardens.

It was also famous for its multi-colored gems, which were, in fact, living lambent creatures. The Queen Mother used one as a focus crystal for her lightsaber, and Hapan bio-scientists had built an entire research facility in Gallinore City for the study of the gems and the planet's other fauna.

Therefore, Taryn hadn't been surprised to learn that this Sinsor Khal was based off of Gallinore, or had been once. Tenel Ka knew little else about the man; after doing some research on Hapes Taryn had confirmed her suspicions that Khal had worked for the old Queen Mother, Ta'a Chume, probably as her private researcher. She had no idea what had happened to Khal after Ta'a Chume's death, but the planet's

reigning Ducha, Markessa, had been appointed to her position by the old witch, which might have meant something.

Still, a frontal assault on the issue was not what Taryn had in mind. Instead she made her way to the research facility, where a dark-haired young woman was handling visitors to the complex.

Taryn showed the woman her identification without explanation. The woman's eyes immediately lit with surprise upon seeing it. It was an expression Taryn was used to seeing on dozens of faces by now. Most people in the Consortium didn't even know of the existence of the Lorellian Court, the Queen Mother's personal security division. It was fully removed from the rest of the Hapan intelligence and military structure, answerable only to Tenel Ka as it had been answerable to Taryn's uncle, Prince Isolder, before her.

To women like this one, Taryn's identicard told her all she needed to know: *This user has full royal authority. Gainsay her nothing.*

The woman- she couldn't have been much younger than Taryn but she suddenly looked childlike-swallowed, put on a professionally bland smile, and said, "What can I do for you today, Mistress?"

"I'd like to see your records for a member of this research facility."

"Of course. May I have the name?"

"He's called Sinsor Khal."

The woman nodded blankly, like the name meant nothing to her at all. It probably didn't. She typed it into her data console; then her eyes narrowed slightly and her lips pressed tight in a frown.

"Well?" asked Taryn, "Is he here or not?"

"I'm... sorry, Mistress. I can't seem to find any record of a Sinsor Khal working here at all."

"I know for a fact he did. It was some time ago, over ten years. Your records must go back that far."

"I assure you they do, Mistress. We simply don't have a record of any Sinsor Khal."

Taryn put venom in her voice. "I'm going to remind you, politely, that I come to you bearing the full authority of the Queen Mother herself."

That got a little panic from her. "Mistress, I *assure* you, I can't find anything."

She spun the screen of her data console on its pivot to show it to Taryn. The older woman leaned across the desk and saw just what the girl had said.

Taryn leaned back and met the girl's eyes. She saw the fear and pleading there and decided to go a little easy on her.

Voice still firm, she said, "I need to speak with the director of this facility. At once."

The girl nodded and ducked away, clearly eager to pass this mess onto someone else but also a little afraid of getting into trouble with the director.

After the girl made the call she told Taryn that the director was on her way and would be here within ten minutes. She bade Taryn to wait in the lobby and gestured to some of the sofa along the long transparent steel wall overlooking a set of especially beautiful gardens.

Taryn settled with pacing, arms crossed angrily over her chest, until the director showed up.

It was an older woman, tall and dignified-looking with steel-gray hair pulled to the back of her neck. She offered Taryn a hand and said, "Greetings, Mistress. I am Director Lovalla, chief of operations."

"Excellent." Taryn didn't bother to introduce herself. She never did when she was on her cousin's business. "Let us go to your office."

Lovalla hesitated for a split-second but covered it well. She nodded politely and led Taryn past the security checkpoint and down the moving walkways leading to the institute's central administration tower. As they were carried down the long glassy connecting corridor, Taryn asked, almost conversationally, "Tell me, Director Lovalla, how long have you been in charge of this facility?"

"Almost sixteen years, Mistress."

"Then you must be quite familiar with its working and personnel."

"Of course."

"Are you the one who makes staff decisions, or do other departments handle their own hiring?"

"I screen and elect department heads, who in turn select their own staff."

"I see. And everything that happens here *is* under your purview, correct?"

"Of course, Mistress. Everything."

"How often does Ducha Markessa directly involve herself with the management of the Institute?"

"Approximately about as much as the Queen Mother does, I would say."

It was a clever, politic answer. Taryn was quiet the rest of the way, until they reached the central tower and rode the turbolift up to the Director's office. Befitting a woman of her position, it had a high broad window that looked out on Gallinore's verdant horizon.

Lovalla bade Taryn to take a chair on the other side of her desk, which she did. When both women were seated, Taryn said, "I will be direct here. I came to inquire about the whereabouts of Sinsor Khal."

Rather than look surprised, feigned or real, Lovalla's brows drew together in thought. The woman tapped her chin as though considering something.

Taryn waited until she said, "I don't know where Khal is."

"Then he *did* work at your Institute?"

"Yes. I'll admit that. He was head of a special research team separate from the rest of the facility. His work was highly classified and his presence unknown to most of the staff."

"How long ago did he stop working here?"

She thought again. "Approximately five years."

It had been that long since Ta'a Chume had suffered her fatal aneurysm. "Was Khal ever in the records at all or was he erased when he left the Institute?"

"He was there," Lovalla said, and offered no further explanation.

Taryn frowned. She couldn't tell what this woman's game was, if she was being compliant or trying to hide something. It was times like these that she wished she had her cousin's Force powers.

"Did you authorize the deletion of his personnel files?" she asked.

Lovalla nodded. "That's correct."

"Was it your decision? Or were you ordered to?"

Lovalla looked thoughtful again. Taryn had to fight down the urge to smack her until the old woman finally said, "I was ordered to by Ducha Markessa."

"Did the Ducha also order Khal to be removed from the facility at that time?"

"That's correct."

"And you have no idea where he was removed to?"

Lovalla nodded once more.

Taryn thought she had a sense of it now, Lovalla was trying to protect her hide and her career- of course- and she had surely been weighing her loyalty to Gallinore's Ducha compared to her loyalty to the Queen Mother's agent.

Lucky for her she'd made the right choice.

Taryn decided to press her a little more. "Did you retain records of Sinsor Khal's research here, or was that deleted along with his personnel records?"

"The records were removed along with Sinsor Khal."

"Meaning the Ducha has those also?" Taryn didn't like the sound of this at all.

"That's correct. However, I can give you some summary of his work, if you're interested."

"Very." Taryn leaned forward. "You can begin by telling me what kind of work he did during the Yuuzhan Vong War."

CHAPTER 16

Tahiri stood in *Mandala's* cockpit, one hand on the back of Vjarna's chair and the other on Muro's, watching over their shoulders as the bright blur of hyperspace suddenly flared out and became a sweep of stars over blackness and the crescent of Euceron's waning nightside face.

"Well, here we are," Muro said. "Anything on the scanners, Revli?"

The Bimm shook his head. "Nothing. We're the only ships in orbit. Probably the only sentient beings in the whole damned system."

"I certainly hope so."

"Have either of you ever been to Euceron before?" Tahiri asked as *Mandala* drew closer to the planet.

"Nope," said Vjarna.

Muro shook her head.

"Well," Tahiri said softly, "Me neither."

She certainly hoped that would make things easier. The Yuuzhan Vong had spread across the galaxy conquering thousands of worlds, each with unique history and culture, and sought to erase all of that and replace it with their own bio-engineered life forms. Anything that had come before their twisted religion was seen as heresy.

Ever with the Yuuzhan Vong memories implanted in her head by a heretical shaper, Tahiri had a hard time mustering sympathy for the Yuuzhan Vong right now. When she'd been on Zonama Sekot for five years, helping to remake their society, it had been easier; she'd been able to see close-up how their twisted religion and rigid caste system had punished anyone who dared independent thought, and she'd come to realize that many of the workers and shamed ones, even intendants, warriors, and shapers, were as much victims of their leaders as the beings native to this galaxy.

Right now, though, thinking of them as victims was a lot harder. Euceron's past, its history and its people, were gone forever and could never be recovered, and the crime against it had been repeated galaxy-wide.

"It almost looks normal," Vjarna observed as they dropped into the planet's lower atmosphere and curved toward its sunlit side. "I mean, it could just be a planet without any people, only natural vegetation."

"Natural probably isn't the right word, but I get what you mean," Tahiri muttered. "You're going to have to head for the northwest continent. Do you have that?"

"Well, we know where *north* is," Vjarna checked the scanners. His furry face dropped into a frown. "To tell the truth, I have no idea what I'm looking for."

"Start scanning surface topography. Also start doing infrared scans. See if you can't find any clusters that might indicate large groups of warm-blooded life-forms. We're trying to find the remains of a large shaper laboratory."

"Not sure what *that* looks like, but I'll give it a shot," the Bimm muttered.

"Dropping altitude now," Muro said. "We'll hang right above the atmospheric envelope."

Tahiri nodded. "That's good. Start doing atmosphere scans too. I want to know what the composition of the air down there is."

"Wouldn't it be primarily oxygen?" asked Vjarna. "The Vong *do* breathe the same stuff as us."

"They do, but there's no telling what's happened to this planet's ecosystem in the past decade. Without Shapers to oversee the process things might have gone out of control."

Muro shook her head. "Well, the atmosphere content seems normal. A little high in carbon monoxide but still plenty breathable."

"I'm showing lots of vegetation down there too," Vjarna said. "Euceron used to be pretty urbanized, right?"

"I think it used to have a few major cities," Tahiri nodded. Her thoughts flashed back to Yuuzhan'tar, as they'd called Coruscant its transformation. "I bet all that's been buried now. They probably seeded the atmosphere with pockets of Vongformed vegetation that covered the ground and spread."

"Sounds like someone laying out a new carpet," Muro muttered.

"It's the most efficient way to transform a planet large-scale. It still takes time for the Vonglife to take root, but once it does it starts eating away at the earth below, grinding it down so it can be replaced."

"Lovely," Vjarna muttered. "How do you know all this stuff, anyway?"

Tahiri swallowed. If the Bimm had any idea that she'd been captured by the Yuuzhan Vong on Yavin 4 and implanted with false memories that had nearly torn her apart, he kept a façade of merry ignorance. Muro might have heard that story too, but if she did, she gave no indication. Tahiri might have broken a little ice with

her but the captain was still hard to read. Right now, she was holding the ship steady right above the atmosphere and checking scanners.

Eventually Tahiri said, "I was sort of the Jedi expert on Yuuzhan Vong."

"Long story?" asked the Bimm.

"And not a happy one."

She thought she saw something twitch on Muro's face but couldn't be sure.

Vjarna tapped his scanners. "How does this look? I see a big cluster of something. Topographical scanners show a sudden spike in elevation, more like a tower than a mountain."

"It could just be ruins from an old city," Muro said.

"I'm getting some heat signature too."

"Can we go further down?" Tahiri asked.

"Not a problem."

Muro kicked *Mandala* into a controlled dive and began vectoring toward the coordinates Vjarna had provided. Tahiri clasped the back of their seats again and looked at the surface of Euceron as it swelled into view. The entire surface was covered in vegetation, and for a second, Tahiri was reminded of Yavin 4 and Zonama Sekot. She had to remind herself that the vegetation on this planet was going to be a lot nastier than anything on those worlds.

When they reached the coordinates, *Mandala* began to circle like a scavenger bird, which in a sense was what it was. Tahiri peered through the viewport at the unmistakable smooth domes of Yuuzhan Vong damuteks, and the high spire that looked so similar to the one the shapers on Yavin 4 had started to build during her captivity.

"That's it," Tahiri said. "Can you find a place to put us down?"

Muro frowned. "We might have to use the ventral laser cannon to burn a clearing."

"Is that all right?" asked Vjarna. "I mean, would it... I don't know... Make anything mad?"

"What kind of life-signs do you pick up down there?" asked Tahiri.

"I'm picking up mobile heat signatures, none of them very large. I don't think there's sentient life, but I can't be sure."

"It's a small risk, but I think we'll be okay. Captain Muro, try burning a hole in that vegetation to set down right next to the tower."

"With pleasure," Muro muttered, and reached out to activate the ventral cannons.

The weapons went off, sending mild reverberations through the freighter's hull. When she was done, Muro pulled up for one more wheel, giving Tahiri a chance to look the blaster-scorched clearing over. Smoke peeled away from burnt vegetation and dissolved in the wind; she couldn't see any creatures moving around the devastation's edge.

"Okay," Tahiri said. "Set us down. Give me a minute to get my things ready. Then drop the landing ramp."

Tahiri didn't have much to grab; only her lightsaber and a pack of foodstuffs and medical supplies she'd purchased at Junction Station. She'd already dressed in a rugged jumpsuit layered with pieces of plasteel armor before they left hyperspace. After tying her hair up in a tight bun, she went down to the loading bay the ramp was already lowered. Muro stood on one side, Vjarna the other, and both looked nervously outside.

"You don't have to come with me," Tahiri said as she adjusted the strap on her shoulder.

"I wasn't even considering it." Muro took a comlink from her pocket and tossed the cylinder to Tahiri. "If I

do decide to abandon you, I'll call and let you know first."

"Much appreciated." Tahiri decided that was sort of a joke. "I don't know how long I'll be in there for. I might be a while. If you see anything unusual out here, anything you might have questions about, let me know."

"We will," Vjarna nodded. "Good luck."

Tahiri nodded back, genuinely grateful, and went down the ramp.

The air outside smelled of burnt vegetation, though beneath that Tahiri thought she could catch the familiar scent of Vongformed worlds. She went to the edge of the burnt clearing and examined the stalks of tall plants; each stem was thick, and the leaves jutting out at regular intervals had serrated edges. *Blas'morn* grass, she recalled. She couldn't remember if she'd seen those on Zonoma Sekot, or if it was knowledge Meezhan Kwaad had implanted in her head long ago. It was scary, sometimes, how easily the two halves of her merged.

She took one last glance over her shoulder, then ignited her lightsaber and began hacking a clear path through the *blas'morn*. As she worked her way to the tower, a flock of flying creatures passed overhead. She tried to spot them, identify them, but could not.

When she reached the tower, she paced around its outside. One good thing about Vongformed structures was that they were all more or less the same, in the way that all trees of the same species were the same. She'd never seen one of these towers in completed form, but her implanted memories told her everything she needed. She walked around its base until she found the circular entry portal; a movable sphincter would have covered the hatch normally, but the tower had

clearly decayed since being abandoned, and the flaps of dry tissue hanging limply from its edges made no effort to stop Tahiri.

That probably meant the movable platforms that functioned as turbolift analogs weren't going to be alive either. Tahiri swapped her lightsaber for a high-intensity glowlamp and scoured the inside of the tower. As she expected, the interior was largely hollow, and a winding staircase curved around the tower's interior, leading upward past level after level of portals.

The shapers called the eight layers of Yuuzhan Vong bio-forming knowledge 'cortexes,' implying one had to spiral upward to gain higher and higher levels of knowledge. Shapers generally weren't of poetic bent, but this tower was a pretty accurate physical representation of that theory.

Tahiri began climbing, scouring the passages ahead of her, poking her head through limp portals, all the while searching for a place where she might interface with the tower's central consciousness, its chorrosk. Similar to a yammosk or a dhuryam, it lived far underground directly beneath the tower and would have been responsible for directing all Vongformed processes on this part of the planet. There was no way to tell for certain that the chorrosk was even still alive when the rest of the tower was clearly withering, but the surrounding landscape seemed full of Vonglife, and besides, chorrosks were engineered to be as durable as they were valuable.

Tahiri found what looked like a place where she could interface: a shaper's qahsa lay abandoned on a ledge, its palm-sized form attached by fleshy umbilical to the wall. She looked closer and saw something else attached to the same place: a translucent facemask like coralskipper pilots wore.

Tahiri had worn those more than a few times, both before she'd fully integrated with her Yuuzhan Vong half and afterward. Though she'd picked up some knowledge of qahsas from the shapers on Zonama Sekot, but she was more familiar with the facemask. She tentatively touched it; the skin was dry but not completely brittle, indicating that some life-giving fluids were still circulating through the tower. She picked it up in both hands, cradled it, and looked down at the mast.

"*Char'lash morn Yun k'varsh b'korrr*," she muttered without thinking. It was an old shaper's incantation, used to beg the Gods for blessing before a difficult procedure.

It was, she supposed, the thing to say at a time like this. She braced herself and placed the mask on her face.

At first nothing happened; she felt a faint, vaguely familiar presence at the corners of her mind, and wondered if the chorrosk was too weak to properly interface with her awareness.

Then it came. She gasped against the soft tissue of the mask and her mind fell away.

She found herself lost, adrift in a sea of data that threatened to overwhelm her and deafen all her senses. For an instant it was like she knew every blade on every stalk of *blas'morn* on the planet, every amphi-staff growing in the nearby swamps, every Vong-formed creature scampering through the brush.

But that wasn't what she wanted.

She pushed all that away and drew strength from the part of herself that was still Yuuzhan Vong. Scant nerve-clusters, implanted and left behind from her time in captivity, made it easier for her to interface with Yuuzhan Vong lifeform, but it was still a trial to tame

the chorrosk like a shaper would and get the information she needed.

She realized, with a touch of surprise, that this chorrosk was struggling to resist her. It was like the creature had gone feral after being abandoned by the shapers, and why wouldn't it? There were probably hundreds or thousands more like it, scattered on planets across the galaxy, no longer truly Yuuzhan Vong creatures but evolving into something else; sometimes, perhaps, even merging with the flora and fauna of native to conquered worlds to create something unique.

Maybe the hybrid worlds would thrive; maybe they would tear themselves apart. Tahiri was still trying to determine which one she was herself, over ten years on.

But finally, she found it: the place in the chorrosk's memory where the shapers had stored the catalog of all their projects. The chorrosks were incapable of communicating with other ones on distant star systems, but the shapers usually did a good job of using qahsas to update the memories of the individual creatures, creating a synchronized system documenting the research.

Normally, the higher levels of research were blocked to all but the most high-level shapers. But that had been a long time ago, and the feral chorrosk, though still chaffing at her intrusion, didn't seem to care much about hypothetical shapers' ranks.

Tahiri had to wrestle with it, but not for very long. The information spilled into her mind: the origins of Shimmra's Slayer project, the genome for the living seeker missiles that had nearly destroyed the all HoloNet transceivers toward the end of the war, the hideous voxyn project that Master Shaper Yal Phaath had overseen.

And, tethered by some strand of thought to the voxyn project, she found what she was looking for.

It was enough to stop her breath. She wanted to scream. She should have known it, should have expected it, but she'd come here in the desperate hope that there would be some other way.

But of course, the universe was not that kind.

Tahiri pulled off the mask and opened her eyes. Everything was dark around her, darker than before. She looked up to the top of the tower and saw, through crumbled holes in the ceiling, a field of twinkling stars.

She realized she was hungry, and her legs aching. She must have connected minds with the chorrosk for hours.

Her face was wet too; either through tears or whatever liquid was from the mask. She wiped it clean as best she could with her sleeve and fished out her comlink. Sure enough, a small light shone on the side, indicating that someone had been trying to call.

She immediately thumbed it on and said, "*Mandala*, do you read me? Captain Muro, please tell me you're still here."

She had to wait for what seemed like an awful eternity before the captain's dry voice replied, "We read you, Miss Veila. We tried coming as the sun went down but got no response."

"It's all right," Tahiri assured her. "I was just... busy, but I'm okay. Are you still where I left you?"

"We are, but we've noticed strange movement around the perimeter since the sun set."

"What kind of movement?"

"Nocturnal animals, probably. If you're coming back, be careful."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you. Veila out."

Tahiri thumbed off the comlink and seriously considered passing the rest of the night here, midway up the

tower. Of course, there was nothing to stop hungry Vongformed animals from crawling up the stairs to eat her, but it would at least be easier to defend herself here.

Unless the nasty creatures were airborne. She looked up at all those visible stars and didn't feel confident at all.

She needed to get off this planet. She needed to get to the source of Yal Phaath's bioweapon project, and she couldn't wait forever. For all Tahiri knew it had already fallen into the hands of rogue Hapans, scheming Imperials, or, for all she knew, old Daala herself.

Still, there was no need to be reckless.

Tahiri sat down on the steps, took out a ration bar, chewed it, and washed it out with some water. She made sure her lightsaber was still at her belt and checked the charge on her glowlamp.

Finally, she found the part inside her that had melded with the chorrosk and let it flow outward, feeling all the Vongformed life in the wilderness outside. Back during the war she'd learned to attune herself to her inner Vongsense, to treat it almost as an extension of the Force, though she'd never been able to reach out through both parts of herself at once.

Anakin had possessed a power like that. So, too, had Jacen Solo; in fact, he'd been the one who'd taught her how to embrace the Yuuzhan Vong half of her senses.

Thinking of Jacen wasn't helping anything. She stood up and took her lightsaber in one hand, her glow-lamp in the other. She began walking slowly down the stairs and out of the tower, keeping her senses attuned at all times to the myriad Vonglife around her.

Outside it was a deeper night than any she could remember. She could hear nothing, not even the distant

whine of *Mandala*'s dormant engines. The stars were incredibly vivid overhead. It was stunning to think that you were one of three sentient beings on an entire planet, and terrifying to know that there were so many more Vongformed worlds with no sentient life at all.

Knowing it would just attract attention, Tahiri turned off her glowlamp and waited for her eyes to adjust to the starlight. Once she was confident she could find her path back to the freighter, she began pressing forward, hands and arms held in front of her to keep branches and stalks from slapping her in the face.

She was able to spot the glow of *Mandala*'s forward lights in the distance and vectored toward their corona. All the while she kept herself attuned to the Vonglife around her. She sensed some awareness, keen and hungry, somewhere in the dark, but when she stopped to listen and try to locate the creature she heard nothing and sensed nothing.

So, warily, grasping her lightsaber tightly in one hand, she trudged onward. The light from *Mandala* was getting closer and closer and but that carnivorous mind was closer too, and she braced herself to run at the slightest signal.

A breeze washed over the field, causing *blas'morn* to ripple and chatter. She paused and listened for something more, like the snapping of branches before a moving body, but there was nothing.

She took another step, and then they came for her.

Her Vongsense gave her the half-second of warning that saved her life. She ignited her lightsaber and turned on her glowlamp and turned both to face the creature coming up behind her. It bounded forward on four legs, tail lashing behind it, stout jaws open to reveal double-layers of jagged teeth. She thrust her saber out, catching the creature in its throat; her blade

sizzled and sparked against armored skin and the creature let out a long, painful wail.

Voxyn.

Then the creature fell back and she got a better look at it. No, not a voxyn, but half of one: a fero xyn, the Vonglife creature that had been combined with a vornskyr to create the Jedi-hunting monsters that had gotten Anakin killed. It was smaller, it couldn't hunt with the Force, and couldn't spit acid, but its claws were still poisonous and its teeth could easily shred flesh off her bones.

And, she remembered, fero xyn always hunted in packs.

Tahiri turned around in time to catch another creature as it leaped toward her. Dropping the glowlamp so she could grip the weapon in both hands, her lightsaber thrust forward this time, piercing the rough skin under the animal's stomach and speaking into its gut. As she struggled to pull her blade free from the corpse the first one rebounded towards her, and another leaped out from the *blas'morn* grass. Tahiri ducked and rolled through the dirt then snapped onto her knees, facing them both, saber held horizontally to block the attack what was surely coming.

The fero xyn growled hungrily but neither attacked, and that meant friends were on the way- their friends. She tried to find her Vongsense again despite her panic, and this time she was able to pivot to the right and swipe her lightsaber out, bringing another fero xyn to a skidding halt before it could attack. That gave the first one room to charge again: it ran forward, kicking the glowlamp on the ground and sending it rolling, its light flashing over *blas'morn* stalks as it got further away. Seeing only by the blue of her lightsaber, Tahiri swung her blade back again, catching the first fero xyn across

the eyes. The animal howled and of course the one at her right leaped forward. Tahiri dropped face-down in the dirt to avoid its claws but its strong tail still cracked like a whip over her back. She rolled onto her side and flashed her lightsaber up, trying to catch another creature in the belly, but this one scampered out of the way.

As the first fero xyn whimpered, the other two advanced. She lay on her shoulder, one leg stretched out into the dirt, feebly pointing her lightsaber at them both, wondering if this was what she deserved for everything she'd done: to be torn apart on this forsaken planet by these awful creatures that were so, so close to the voxyn that had begun her downward spiral all those years ago.

Then she heard the distinctive tang of blaster-shots being fired. The fero xyn halted, ears pricked up, hesitating. Then a red laser blast caught it right in the face. It flashed and smoked against the monster's armored skin and Tahiri used the opening to throw her lightsaber in the Force-controlled loop; its blade spun like a blue circle of light until it speared through the side of the fero xyn's stomach.

Scrambling to her feet, Tahiri called the lightsaber back to her hand. Only then did she turn and see Rahley Muro standing behind her, the glowlamp attached to her BlasTech T-14 rifle blazing ahead and catching the last fero xyn in the face. Light didn't scare the creature; its jaw hung low, hungry.

"Run," Tahiri said, and they did.

Both women sprinted through the remaining trail, their path lit by Muro's light. Tahiri stayed behind, waving her lightsaber to discourage pursuit, but she kept looking forward to follow the path and couldn't tell if the fero xyn was actually after them.

When they reached *Mandala* a nervous-looking Vjarna was standing at the top of the ramp, clearly eager to close it and fly off this rock. Muro ran halfway up, turned to fire a few shots over her shoulder just in case, then kept running. She was almost at the top, Tahiri right behind her, when a dark body flashed out of nowhere and caught her in the side. Muro dropped her weapon and went clattering onto the ramp. The feroxyn's teeth snapped at her as she tried to pull herself out from under its claws.

Tahiri ran straight into it with her lightsaber pointing dead ahead. It stabbed into the creature's sides and it sent out its own yelp of pain. Tahiri pulled her saber out then gave the monster the strongest kick she could, throwing it off-balance and sending it tumbling down the ramp.

As Vjarna hurried to the controls and started retracting the ramp, Tahiri grabbed hold of Muro and held her by the waist to keep her from falling too. When the ramp finally settled in its horizontal position and sealed them inside the ship, both women collapsed on the hard deck.

"Are you all right?" Tahiri gasped. "Did it get you with its claws?"

"No," Muro replied, "No, I'm okay."

There was a pause, where the two women just panted while Vjarna looked on. Then Muro rasped, "I was going to say you owed me one, but I guess we're even now."

"Yeah," Tahiri said, "That sounds about right."

CHAPTER 17

When Zekk woke up, he found himself exactly where he'd started.

He spent a while scowling at the ceiling of his cell before he tried to sit upright and stretch feeling back into his body. A stun blast at close range could wrack a being's nervous system badly, and when he felt the small of his back he immediately winced at the bruise left by the shot.

He got up and lurched for the door. Once he was sure he'd found his balance, Zekk began pounding the door and yelling, "All right, I'm awake! Call your boss and tell him I want to talk! Don't think I can't break out of here again!"

Nobody replied, of course.

He didn't try and break out right away. His senses were still addled and he might get hurt even more if he tried something bold. Moreover, there really wasn't a point. He was stuck on *Wayward Soldier* no matter how much he wanted to get off and the only person who could ultimately set him free was a Yuuzhan Vong masquerading as a man who claimed that he was, apparently, totally over the huge genocidal war when his people had launched a holy war to exterminate all Jedi.

Nobody got over the past that easily.

Zekk certainly didn't.

So he waited, and tried to keep his mind off everything except his messed-up body, because that was easiest to fix. After a few more hours of exercises he felt like he was almost ready to break out of his cell again.

He stewed for a few more hours, until he was actually seriously considering another break-out, when the door slid open without warning and the hulking formed of *Wayward Soldier's* first officer filled the entire threshold.

"Good, you're awake," Chazdrul Harn said.

"I banged on the door a couple hours ago. Didn't your guards hear me?"

The Baragwin blinked and ignored the question. "Come with me. We have need of you."

"You have *need* of me?" Zekk planted his hands on his hips. "That's it?"

Harn blinked again. "Do you want an apology for shooting you?"

"It would be a good start."

"Well, you won't get one. The captain gave Harkum the order going in. If he was forced to give you your lightsaber, you would be stunned at the end of the mission. Otherwise you'd never give it back, and with that lightsaber you'd become a threat to the ship, its crew, and its mission."

Zekk stared at Harn, trying to make out any emotion on that very unhuman face. He couldn't get anything in the Force either, and he knew arguing any more with him would be equivalent to arguing with a slab of duracrete.

If anything, the duracrete might be a little more pliable.

“Okay,” Zekk sighed, “What do you need me for? Tell me or I won’t go.”

“We need you to interrogate the prisoner.”

In his anger over being shot Zekk had almost forgotten the mission itself. “What, is the moff not complying with your techniques?”

“He’s stubborn. It turns out Imperials train their officials to resist torture.”

“Even Yuuzhan Vong torture? Did your boss try to get him to embrace the pain?”

Harn didn’t miss a beat. “For better or worse, the captain hasn’t brought any of those aboard, so we’ve had to make do with more traditional means.”

“And he thinks I can get him to talk with my Jedi powers?”

“We’ve heard Jedi have the ability to influence other beings’ minds. Is this false?”

Zekk wanted to spit out a retort, or even deny it, but a realization stopped him. Praelyx had allowed him a handful of news reports to sate his curiosity about the outside galaxy, but those had probably been carefully curated for the select purpose of leading Zekk on and getting him to take part in the raid on Selonía.

If he could get inside that Moff’s mind, he might find out things Praelyx didn’t want him to know. Then again, the Yuuzhan Vong was no fool. Maybe he had already figured on that, and maybe this was part of a game even more twisted than what Zekk had supposed, but an opportunity was presenting itself and he was loathe to simply reject it.

Still, he didn’t want to make it too easy, so he told the Baragwin, “Your captain promised me he’d sit me down and explain what this mission is really about. I want him to do that first. In exchange, I’ll find out what the Moff’s hiding.”

Harn blinked and didn't respond. It seemed, for once, the Baragwin didn't have a reply in stock.

"I might be your prisoner but I'm not your slave. I want Praelyx to fulfill his half of the bargain. Without that, I'm not doing anything for you."

Harn gave one of those deep Baragwin snorts. "Very well. I'll return shortly."

The door slid shut, leaving Zekk alone again. This time he reached out with the Force and tried to feel for beings out in the hallway. He sensed one; probably not Harn. He'd gotten past two guards before and one would be even easier, though what he'd do once he got free was still an open question. *Ranger*-class gunships, unfortunately, were not big enough to have docking bays and there were probably no attached ships he could steal.

So he resigned himself to waiting again. This time, thankfully, did not take as long. The door slid open and Evan Praelyx stepped into the room with his very human face on.

"I'm surprised you came." Zekk crossed his arms over his chest.

"I was busy before. That's why I sent Harn."

"Busy interrogating that Moff?"

"That's right."

"When are you going to tell me what this is all about? I mean *really* tell me? You made a promise, remember?"

"That I did. All right. What do you want to know, Jedi?"

"How about why we broke into a star destroyer in the middle of a peace conference to steal an Imperial Moff from his bed chambers?"

"We work for hire. That's what our employer paid us to do. They also wanted to avoid casualties that might

cause the restart of hostilities. We have you to thank for that.”

“*Did* hostilities restart? Or is the Selonía conference still going on?”

“Oh, it’s still on. Frankly, the new Imperial Head of State probably doesn’t miss Moff Westermal anyway.”

Zekk frowned. “Who *is* the new Head of State? Who could replace Pellaeon?”

“Apparently he was fostered on the Moffs by the Jedi, even though his connection with the Empire was tenuous at best.” Praelyx snorted. “Your kind never stop meddling, do they?”

Now Zekk was really confused. “*Who* did the Jedi appoint?”

“A fighter pilot named Jagged Fel.”

Zekk’s jaw dropped. He snapped it back up when Praelyx’s masquered face grinned amusement.

“I take it you’re familiar with him,” Praelyx said.

There was no way in all nine Corellian hells that Zekk was going to explain to this Vong how he’d spent a good chunk of the past year trapped in an arduous love triangle with his teenage girlfriend and a stuffy fighter pilot exiled from the Chiss Ascendancy who was, apparently, inexplicably, now an emperor too.

So instead he said, “Yeah.”

“Fel didn’t hire us to kidnap his own Moff, if that’s what you’re asking. We were hired by a certain party from the Hapes Consortium. They’re apparently interested in a certain research project Moff Westermal was involved in.”

“Research project?” Zekk’s anger spiked. “Was he involved in the nanoweapon that killed Tenel Ka’s daughter?”

“I believe he was, yes.” Praelyx said slyly. “My employer believes he’s also involved in *another* such

research project. Would you like to meet with him now?"

Zekk's hands balled into fists. "Yes," he said, "I think I would."

"I thought so. This way."

Praelyx and the guard at his door, a snarling Trandosha, led Zekk through the gunship's hallways and down a lift tube to what Zekk realized must have been near the ship's outer hull. He realized that an airlock chamber was, psychologically speaking, a good place to perform a high-pressure interrogation, so he was unsurprised when they stepped through the initial portal into the vestibule to see Moff Westermal cuffed to a chair by his ankles and wrists with Harn and Harkum standing behind him. They'd turned him to face the outer airlock so he could see black space looming just beyond the transparisteel porthole.

One look at Westermal told Zekk the Moff had put up impressive resistance. His face was bruised and battered and his clothing torn. The red-stained bandages on his fingertips indicated that his captors had already brought out the nasty methods. Westermal's head currently hung low, eyes closed, and he was breathing in and out at a slow, steady rhythm suggesting sleep.

Zekk sidled next to Praelyx and asked in a low voice. "You ever been through that Embrace of Pain?"

The masquered eyes narrowed. "No. I have not."

"Lucky you," Zekk said, and stepped forward. He crouched in front of the captive Imperial and lightly slapped his chin. The man's eyes popped open.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" Zekk asked.

Westermal's upper lip curled in a so-very-Imperial sneer. "More pirate trash, I assume."

"Actually, no. I'm a Jedi."

Westermal's sneer didn't slip. "How very nice for you."

Zekk leaned closer. "I'm a very old friend of the Hapan Queen, Tenel Ka. You know about her, don't you?"

That got a reaction. His eyes opened wider, even the right one, which was stuck halfway closed by the swelling of a split eyebrow. Westermal reined in his expression quickly, though Zekk could feel a new surge of alarm off him in the Force.

"Do you want retribution? I thought Jedi didn't take revenge."

"I wasn't always a good Jedi. I know the Remnant didn't officially support it, but I'm sure some of you Moffs had a hand in financing Brakiss' project. Do you remember the Second Imperium?"

"Vaguely."

"I trained at the Shadow Academy before I ever trained as a Jedi. Brakiss called me his Darkest Knight."

Westermal kept his battered face cold but Zekk could feel his fright growing. "The Shadow Academy was a very long time ago."

"I can still remember all of it though," Zekk said darkly. The anger he slipped in his voice was cold and controlled and very, very real. "Brakiss taught me how to channel my darker feelings and use them for things the Jedi would call impure. Dangerous."

Westermal bore his teeth. "Tried to make a Jacen Solo out of you, eh?"

The remark stung, stung deep. It also made Zekk angrier. He reached out with the Force and gave Westermal a forward tug. The moff's shoulder strained against his hand-cuffs and he let out a *whoof* of breath as his face fell within inches of Zekk's.

And the shock and fear were there, on his face and in the Force. And to Zekk it felt very good.

“What’s your next scheme?” Zekk said. “Who’s your target?”

“I’ll never tell you, *Jedi*.”

Westermal’s anger said enough. “Is that who you’re after? Are you going to target Jedi next?”

It was certainly possible. There were elements of beings’ genetic makeup that indicated Force-sensitivity, just as it indicated heredity. It was much harder to track and quantify, especially given the variety of species that could use the Force, but a nanovirus could be tailored to Fett or Djo genes it could theoretically be made to target Jedi too.

The thought left Zekk staggered. Not even Palpatine had attempted such a thorough slaughter. Zekk reached out and pressed a hand against the man’s temple.

“Tell me where it is,” Zekk said immediately. “Where are you working on the nanovirus?”

Westermal’s face twisted as he tried to resist the tendrils of the Force reaching into his mind. The Moff was stubborn and resilient, but Zekk knew that if he pressed hard enough he could break through any mental barriers and find out what was really going on. All he needed was raw power.

He only had to think of little Allana, murdered by this man and his schemes, and anger gave him all the power he needed.

Zekk sent a spike of raw pain into Westermal’s nervous system. The man cried out and tried to retreat into his mind, ignoring the sensations of the body, the way he’d been trained to. Zekk followed him inside his deepest shell and kept up the attack.

“Jedi....” He moaned, “You damned Jedi.... Kill all you... You vermin...”

Zekk barely heard him. He chased Westermal inside his own mind, unrelenting, punishing him with waves of painful sensation that sparked all through the man's nervous system. His limbs rattled in their binds and spittle flew from his lips, making wet splotches on Zekk's face, but he didn't relent.

"Where is it?" Zekk said aloud, said in the Force, said deep in Westermal's mind. "Where is the new nanovirus? *Where?*"

"It's not!" Westermal howled. "It's not! It's not!"

"Not *what?*" Zekk growled, relenting just enough for the moff to put frantic thoughts into order.

"It's not," he panted, "It's not... not a nanovirus... It's... bio..."

"A bioweapon?"

"Vong weapon. Solo... Jacen Solo.... He told us..."

Zekk's first thought was that there was no way Caedus could have been so suicidally stupid as to develop a bioweapon against Force-users when he was one himself. But then, he might have thought he could just deploy it at Shedu Maad, wipe out the Jedi there, and call it enough.

"Where is the weapon?" Zekk pressed.

"Vong weapon," Westermal repeated. "Not ours. Couldn't even... develop... Needed help."

"Help? Help from who?"

Westermal attempted to recoil within himself, but Zekk followed again and sent punishing pain through his body. Finally the Moff relented and said, "Hapan. Hapan scientist. On... Gallinore. Don't know name... Sent team to extract."

"Your team and the scientist, where are they now?"

Westermal's incisors stabbed down on his lower lip as he willed himself not to talk. Yet it didn't matter; Zekk could sense the answer repeated over and over in

the Moff's mind like an incantation. It was a single word, a single name, that sent shudders of dread through Zekk's mind.

He took his hand off Westermal's face. The Moff let out one gasp then slid into unconsciousness.

As his body hung slack in its binds, Zekk stood up on aching knees.

"Well, Jedi?" Praelyx, standing behind him, cocked an eyebrow. "What do you have for us?"

"The bioweapon was being developed on Myrkr," Zekk said.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but all Praelyx gave him was a simple nod. "Very good."

Zekk looked down at the Moff. "What will you do to him now? Space him?"

"Ah, no, that might start a war." Praelyx tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Our employer actually didn't specify what to do with him. Might try to ransom him. I doubt Jagged Fel will want him back, but some of his fellow moffs might pay a hefty fee. Or not. There's only one way to be sure."

Zekk looked down at the unconscious Imperial and found he was disappointed; he actually *did* want them to space Westermal.

That was when the enormity of what he'd done hit him. His rage over Allana's death had driven him to a dark place he hadn't been to since the Shadow Academy. All the old evil knowledge Brakiss had put into his dead, the knowledge he'd always thought he'd expunged, had actually been lying dormant all that time, waiting to be put to use.

He was disgusted with himself, all the more because it had been so horrifically *easy* to channel his own darkest impulses. It had seemed so simple and so *right* while he was doing it.

He wondered if it had felt that way for Jacen.

Zekk looked at Praelyx and asked, "What happens now? Do we go to Myrkr?"

"I'll have to consult with our employer. But yes, that does seem likely. For all we know Westermal's team and their Hapan scientist are already there."

"Okay. I've been there once before."

"Myrkr?"

"The worldship over Myrkr. The shaper research facility where they made the voxyn. It has to be there."

"If you know your way around the place already, perhaps you'd like to come along."

Zekk wanted to tell this Vong that he'd never do anything he wanted, but that was stupid. He'd been doing it already. He realized then what he should have realized before if not for his anger: He had no idea who Praelyx's employers were, and without the Force to help him he never could. For all he knew the pirate had been hired by some scheming Hapan noble who wanted to use the bioweapon to finish the job and kill Tenel Ka.

In fact, it seemed the most likely option.

If he went to Myrkr, to that awful old worldship, he might find a way to stop Praelyx's schemes and Westermal's both, and somehow destroy the bio-weapon completely. In fact, it was the *only* way to make sure the weapon was never used.

He stared at Praelyx's human, yet alien, eyes. The Vong captain was no fool. He probably knew everything that was running through Zekk's head, and when they got to Myrkr the captain would do everything he could to keep Zekk from destroying the weapon.

But even if they were working at cross-purposes, they needed each other, and they both knew it.

“Okay,” Zekk said, staring right in the Yuuzhan Vong’s eyes. “Let’s go to Myrkr.”

“You seem to have him where you want him now,” Chazdrul Harn admitted, rather grudgingly, after he and Praelyx had returned to the bridge. The Jedi, to Harn’s great surprise, had agreed to return to his comfortable cell while *Wayward Soldier* made its way to Myrkr.

“I always did,” Praelyx said with a grin, but Harn knew him well enough to hear the hollowness in his bravado.

“You got him angry,” Harn added. “I’ve heard Jedi can be very dangerous when angry.”

“He’s not angry at *us*. That’s what matters.”

“Not angry for now.”

No matter how useful the man had been so far, Harn was still never going to feel comfortable having him on this ship. Neither would a large chunk of *Wayward Soldier*’s crew. They were mercenaries, pirates, and privateers, which meant they were pragmatists overall, and Jedi, light or dark, were never that. More to the point, Harn knew he wasn’t the only one aboard who’d dabbled in service to the Peace Brigade during the Vong War. Harn had never captured any Jedi himself, but he’d run his share of weapons and supplies, and he doubted that minor technicality would make any difference to a Jedi who already had obvious revenge on his mind.

The crew around them knew what they were doing, and as captain and first officer stood among them they plotted out the necessary course. The gunship shuddered slightly as it made its initial jump to light-speed. The flashing blue of hyperspace lit up the command deck, and Harn turned his head away.

“What do we do with Westermal?” he asked.

“I’ll have to contact our employers and give them an update. I have a feeling they might want to get involved themselves.”

Harn snorted. He didn’t like it when other people got involved in their jobs, even clients. “And what if they don’t want the Moff?”

“I figure *someone* in the Remnant would pay good money to get him back.”

“If he’s lucky,” said Harn. It would definitely be their luck too; he imagined Westermal’s kin, if nobody else, would pay very handsomely for his ransom. “Any news from Selonia?”

“A lot of confusion, but no breakdown in talks.”

Harn snorted again. He didn’t especially care who won or lost the war- or who could *claim* to have won or lost- but it *had* been good for business. Still, a resumption of hostilities would be a very messy affair and what was left of his conscience was glad not to be responsible for such a thing.

He leaned a little closer to Praelyx and said, “Can I ask a personal question?”

Praelyx looked at him a little warily, then waved him off the command deck. Once they were in an empty hallway, Harn asked, “Did you know where this would take us when you accepted the job?”

Praelyx looked honestly surprised, but Harn knew his boss could be a good actor when he chose to be.

“I mean it,” the Baragwin pressed. “I’m not crazy about poking through old Vong secrets.”

“That’s the job.”

“But did you *know* it would be the job? Or is this as much a surprise to you as it is to the rest of us?”

Praelyx narrowed his eyes. “It honestly is. We were hired to capture Westermal, but that’s *all*.”

“And Myrkr?”

“Never even been there.”

But he had, Harn knew, been born and raised on a Yuuzhan Vong worldship just like the one orbiting the abandoned planet. Harn usually didn't care that his captain had once been part of a genocidal alien army slaughtering its way across the galaxy- hell, in the Peace Brigade he'd even *helped* that army for a profit- but he didn't like sudden reminders of Praelyx's past either.

Praelyx's masquered face was guarded; it was clear he wasn't going to volunteer anything right now, and if he pressed, Harn would only drive a wedge between him and his captain shortly before a dangerous mission.

Which meant it all came down to trusting a Yuuzhan Vong. He'd done that plenty of times before, but it felt different now.

“All right,” he said at last. “Do you think you'll be able to help us at all, if we get into any trouble?”

“Yuuzhan Vong trouble?” Praelyx raised an eyebrow. “Chazdrul, all this time I thought that's what the *Jedi* was for.”

CHAPTER 18

The Ducha's palace lay in the heart of Gallinore City, and while it lacked the scale of the Fountain Palace on Hapes, it definitely tried to compete in terms of grandeur. The ceiling of the vestibule hovered a good ten meters over Taryn Zel's head and glittered with the colors of Gallinore's famous rainbow gems. Elegant bas-relief carvings depicting tales from the annals of Hapan history adorned the green-stone walls while the floor itself was covered with tapestries of gold and silver silk, wound in patterns so detailed you could spend the whole day examining them.

It was a good enough place to wait for half a standard hour.

When Ducha Markessa finally appeared, she came with a half-dozen female guards, an equal number of handsome male retainers, and no apologies.

"Thank you for coming to Gallinore, Mistress," the Ducha said with a smile, though she didn't bow her head or give any sign of deference. This was, in fairness, the customary way to treat members of the Lorellian Court, as the old noblewoman surely knew. Still, to Taryn it seemed to smack faintly of insolence.

One of Markessa's retainers offered to take Taryn's cloak, and while the man was certainly winsome she

politely refused. "Please, Ducha, I would like to speak privately. I assure you this will not take long."

"Very well. We'll retreat to the western reading room." Markessa snapped her fingers. "Leave us, all of you."

The retainers and guards all bowed and the processional stepped aside so Markessa could lead Taryn down the long gilded hallway and into a side room. She closed the heavy wooden doors behind her, leaving them alone in a room where ancient shelves hosted rows and rows of even more ancient bound books.

As she sat down on a couch, Markessa asked, "Have you enjoyed your voyage to Gallinore thus far, Mistress?"

"Of course," Taryn said, sitting across the low table in a seat opposite Markessa's. "I always enjoy Gallinore. It's one of the most beautiful worlds in the Consortium."

"I'm pleased to hear you say that." She waved a hand to indicate all her books. "We value history and beauty on Gallinore, as you can see."

History and beauty were valued all throughout the Hapes Consortium; Tenel Ka said too much so. Normally Taryn was inclined to disagree with her cousin's dim assessments, but the recent events- the attempted coup against the Queen Mother last year, Jacen Solo's sudden turn from friend to foe, the opportunistic schemes of Ducha Requud- were starting to change her mind.

"I'm afraid what I've some to talk about is neither historic nor beautiful," Taryn said.

"I know. Director Lovella warned me you'd be coming," Markessa smiled tightly. Taryn should have expected that. "She told me that you're looking for

everything you can get about Sinsor Khal, especially his current whereabouts.”

“That pretty much covers it.”

“I thought so. I have to say, I haven’t thought about Khal in a very long time. Years, perhaps.”

“According to the Director, you were the one who removed him from his research post and erased all his records at the Institute.”

“Technically, I gave the order to Director Lovella. She actually carried it out.” Markessa smiled politely, like they were discussing racing scores. “But yes, it was my decision. And I assure you, I meant nothing nefarious behind it, no matter what you may think.”

“Do you know what I think?” Taryn cocked a red eyebrow.

Markessa kept manicured hands folded in her lap. “I know who you are and what you do. I know your job is to see enemies in every shadow because that’s where the danger to the Queen Mother always lurks. But not *every* shadow holds danger.”

“What does this shadow hold?”

“A Ducha who was simply looking out for the interests of her queen.”

“You removed Khal from his post *after* the death of Ta’a Chume. Tenel Ka had already been on the throne for the better part of a decade.”

“Indeed, and Ta’a Chume was under, ah, house arrest. But anyone who knew Ta’a Chume knew not to count her out until she was stone dead.”

It was paramount to a confession of disloyalty, but Taryn had a feeling the Ducha was playing a game on purpose, trying to string her further away from her main concern.

“Tell me,” Taryn leaned forward, “How was removing Khal a favor to the Queen Mother?”

"She is, let us say, not the kind to countenance the secret research projects Khal was tasked with. It's the Jedi in her." Markessa said the word with quiet disdain. "I was faced with the choice of *asking* her whether she wanted to let Khal's research continue- which I'm sure she'd find offensive- or of ending it quietly on my own initiative."

"I'll be sure to relay your thoughtfulness to the Queen Mother," Taryn said dryly. "Director Lovella already told me what kind of research Khal was doing during the Yuuzhan Vong War. She also said you confiscated all his records. Do you still have them?"

"I do," Markessa said, shockingly blunt. "Do you want a copy?"

"No. I want the original data-files."

"Then you'll have it." She was being far too obliging. Taryn was sure she had extra copies of her own somewhere. "But that's not why you're *really* here, is it?"

"Ducha, I need to know where Sinsor Khal is right now."

"I can't help you. I simply don't know."

"What happened when he was removed from the Institute?"

"He was placed under house arrest on Gallinore, which was effectively what he was under while *at* the Institute. But now he had no laboratory."

Taryn fought a frown. "House arrest? Was he still considered dangerous?"

Markessa smirked, like she was talking to a foolish child. "Mistress, do you know what Sinsor Khal was before he came to Gallinore?"

Taryn frankly had no clue, but she wasn't going to confess ignorance to the Duchu. "Some of it. What do *you* know?"

“Khal was not Hapan originally. If you'd ever met the man you could tell it by sight; he's far from handsome. In any case, Ta'a Chume personally brought him to Hapes, to Gallinore, to do research for her. All very confidentially, of course.”

“Where did she find him?”

“My understanding- and this is what she told me, a long time ago- was that Khal was kidnapped as a baby by the old Jedi and taken to learn their religion on Coruscant. Apparently he was not strong enough in the Force, and was simply expelled from the cult.” Markessa shook her head as if the ways the Jedi had treated people was simply disgraceful. “He was still relatively young when Ta'a Chume found him. The Emperor was beginning his Jedi Purge at the time and apparently even wash-outs weren't safe. So he was eager for any route of escape.”

Some of it was falling into place now, but not all. Hapan suspicion of Jedi ran centuries deep, but she didn't see that alone as a reason to imprison Khal within his laboratory. “Was Khal violent? Unstable?”

“Oh, no, he's a very stable being. Too stable, frankly. Too cold. That was what made him very... abnormal, but also useful.” Markessa looked at her manicured hands and added, as if in afterthought, “Ta'a Chume always said Jedi were prone to insanity. I suppose our queen can be seen as the exception to Jacen Solo's rule.”

Taryn swallowed. The Queen Mother had been very close with Jacen Solo for a very long time. Though she'd never confirmed it, Taryn suspected Allana had been his child.

Markessa may have heard those rumors. She smirked and said, “Suffice to say, Sinsor Khal was useful, but in the end, he was a man you wouldn't show your back to.”

"You said you don't know where Khal is now. What happened to him?"

Markessa gave a frustrated sigh. "I'm afraid he left."

"Left where? When?"

"I can't say as to where, otherwise I'd know where he is now. But as to *when*, I'd say, oh.... About two weeks ago."

Taryn blinked. That was when the Imperials had launched their attack on the *Dragon Queen*. If Jagged Fel's intelligence was right, then the Imperial Moff's had struck out to utilize Jacen Solo's last weapon at the same time.

"How did he leave?"

"I'm sorry to say he was kidnapped. An armed shuttle broke into his compound and stole him. Our security was overwhelmed."

"What kind of shuttle?"

She didn't even have to think. "An assault shuttle. *Gamma-class*."

Taryn thought the odds were about even that there'd been a shuttle but no assault, and that Markessa had simply *let* the Imperials take Khal away on the condition that she'd get some of that bioweapon to use against Tenel Ka. "An enemy warship assaulted your world. Why didn't you report this to the Queen Mother and Admiral Baas?"

"Mistress, we both know they had bigger problems at the time. Besides, this was a matter of local security."

"But with clear import to the rest of the Consortium. Maybe the rest of the galaxy."

Markessa looked earnestly confused. "Is that so? Do you have any idea why Imperials wanted to kidnap Sinsor Khal?"

Taryn did, and she bet Markessa knew it too, but there was no point in making accusations of treason

when she couldn't prove them. She could find proof later; right now she had to find Khal.

"We're looking into it," Taryn said simply. "As you must know, our relations with the Imperial Remnant are quite tense at the moment. Any sign of its involvement must be thoroughly examined."

"Of course." Markessa spread her hands. "I'll give you any help you might need."

It took Taryn a lot of effort not to laugh.

Taryn waited while Markessa's servants brought her what were supposedly the data-cores containing Sinsor Khal's research. She had no doubt Markessa kept copies of it all for herself but there was no way to prove it conclusively, especially not when Taryn was without Trista to help her on this mission.

After bidding Markessa a polite goodbye, Taryn was glad to leave her glorious little palace. As she marched back to the spaceport she kept looking over her shoulder for a tail, but found none. When she reached her ship, she spent twenty standard minutes searching it for any sign that it had been tampered with, from bombs to listening devices.

When she was certain she was secure, she fired up the comm system and placed a call to her sister.

Wherever Trista was, she wasn't near a holo-projector, so the connection was audio-only. She asked without prelude, "What have you found on Gallinore, sister?"

"Some hints, but nothing concrete. Ducha Markessa says Sinsor Khal was kidnapped by Imperials around the same time as the battle at Shedu Maad."

"And I suppose she forgot to report this foreign attack on Hapan soil?"

"She considered it a matter of 'local security'," Taryn said mockingly.

“How likely was it she was involved?”

“I’d say very. She handed over data-cores containing Sinsor Khal’s research without a fight. Right now we need to locate Khal. I can keep investigating here to find what Markessa is hiding, but I might need your help.”

“Don’t bother. You should come back to Hapes right away.”

Taryn frowned. “Is that an order from Tenel Ka?”

“It is. I was about to call you anyway.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me anything else on the comm.”

“Only in person, sister.”

“All right, then. I’m in my ship now and I’ll get to Hapes as quickly as I can.”

“See you soon, sister.”

“See you soon.” Taryn flicked off the comlink and frowned to herself in her ship’s small cockpit. Whatever Trista or Tenel Ka had learned, she hoped it wasn’t what Taryn had just spent the past day ferreting out. She hated to think she’d wasted her time.

But there was only one way to find out. Taryn started warming her engines and prepared for liftoff.

CHAPTER 19

Neither Tahiri nor Captain Muro received any life-threatening injuries during the fight with the fero xyn, but they'd still received plenty of cuts, scrapes, and bruises. *Mandala's* medbay was more than equipped to handle them, and once Vjarna piloted the ship up into Euceron's atmosphere, both women went to patching up their hurt.

As she lay on one of the two medical couches and applied a bacta patch to the wound on her forehead, Tahiri asked, "How did you know I needed help? I never commed you."

"We could see your light from the cockpit," Vjarna supplied as he handed Muro a suture for a long cut on her elbow. "When it went rolling around, flashing on and off, we figured that meant trouble."

"I'm glad I had you watching out for me. I can't thank you enough."

"Don't mention it." The captain winced as she stuck the suture on. "Now, more importantly, did you find what you wanted in there or are we going to have to scope out more lovely worlds?"

Tahiri sighed and settled back in her couch. The other two stared a question at her and she held up a hand, asking for time to gather her thoughts.

She hadn't found what she'd wanted, but she'd found what she'd been expecting to find, and that was much, much worse. The elation of having survived the scrape on the planet was waning fast, and she felt the weight of what was to come settling over her.

Finally she said, "I know where we have to go. It should just be one more stop."

"Another Vongformed world?" asked Vjarna.

"Kind of. We won't actually be landing *on* that world." She looked at the tall human and the tiny Bimm. "What kind of vac suits do you have here?"

Muro blinked. "One for each of us. Plus a spare."

"Well," Tahiri smiled weakly. "That works out pretty nicely."

"And that means what?"

"It means you should set course for the planet Myrkr. It's in the Inner Rim, a little off the Vaakthree Circuit."

"I've heard of it," Muro nodded. "What's there?"

Tahiri swallowed. "Can I have a drink of water?"

Vjarna provided one promptly. Tahiri took a sip to wet her throat. When she still didn't answer, Muro asked, "Have you been to Myrkr before?"

"Do you remember Anakin Solo?"

"The old Chief of State's son?" Vjarna nodded. "I remember he died during the Vong War, around the same time Coruscant fell."

"He died at Myrkr. I was with him."

They both stared at her. It seemed surreal, having to explain to these near-strangers the basic facts that had become the fulcrum point of her entire life.

Still, she forced herself to go on. "We were part of a Jedi strike team. We went behind the lines to destroy a... weapon the Yuuzhan Vong had created, an anti-Jedi weapon designed by their Master Shaper, Yal Phaath. They were using the old worldship over Myrkr

as a research lab and testing ground. We succeeded, but not everyone made it out. Anakin didn't."

She didn't think she could go any more without her voice breaking. Thankfully, neither Muro nor Vjarna looked like they needed further explanation. Maybe they'd already figured she'd been in love with Anakin; if not, she didn't have to tell them.

"Did you know we'd have to go back to Myrkr?" Muro asked, voice level and bereft of either criticism or sympathy.

Tahiri shook her head. "I didn't. I thought it might be possible, but I had to be sure. According to what I found on Euceron, Myrkr is our best bet." She paused, then added, "Technically, it's a worldship, an old broken-down worldship that's still orbiting the planet. That's why I'll need a vac suit."

"We," Muro said.

Tahiri shook her head. "This is my mission. I'm not paying you to do anything more than transport me."

The captain crossed her bandaged arms over her chest. "In that case, I'll add your rescue down on the planet to my bill."

Tahiri frowned. "You really don't have to come with me into that worldship. There's nothing there, it's all breached to the vacuum and dead. I'll be safe."

"I'd never trust the vacuum to kill Vonglife. They built whole ships to survive the void."

Tahiri glanced at Vjarna. "Are you okay with this?"

The Bimm looked a little hesitant, and Muro said, "It's all right, Revli. You don't have to go. We need somebody to stay with *Mandala* and keep her safe anyway."

Vjarna nodded, clearly relieved. The captain said, "Revli, can you excuse yourself? I'd like to have a word in private."

With another relieved nod, the Bimm stepped out of the medbay, leaving Tahiri and Muro to stare at each other from opposite couches.

"Is my helping you going to be a problem?" asked Muro.

"No. It's not. It would be safer to go in there with two people. I'm just wondering what's in it for you."

Muro stared at her blankly; the woman was damnably hard to read in the Force. She said, "I bet you have a guess."

"If you want revenge on the Yuuzhan Vong, you're not going to find much opportunity in a cracked-open old worldship. Everything there's already dead."

"You seem pretty sure about that."

"Are you asking if I've been there *since* the war?" Muro nodded. Tahiri wanted to flinch from her gaze but held it. "I went there a few times. With... Jacen Solo."

"Why?"

"It's a very long story and I don't want to talk about it. But no, I had no idea he might have been using those trips to search for long-lost Yuuzhan Vong bioweapons. At the time I had no idea he'd fallen that far."

"And that's why you didn't want to go."

"I've had two sets of awful experiences on that worldship. I really didn't want a third, but I guess I have no choice."

"Apparently the universe has it out for you."

It felt weird to have someone else say it out loud. Tahiri gave a dry, bitter sigh. "Someone's got to find out if the bioweapon's still there, and short of a real breathing Yuuzhan Vong, I'm the best bet."

Muro raised an eyebrow. "I've heard things about you. They said you were captured by the Vong. Some say you were brainwashed, or they tried to shape you."

“Yeah. That’s close enough. It also means I understand the Yuuzhan Vong better than almost anybody.”

“So that’s why nobody else in the whole galaxy can go to Myrkr and take care of this?”

“Pretty much.”

Muro’s stern expression softened into a wistful smile. “You’re braver than I thought. Some people have been saying you were a coward for doing what Jacen Solo made you do.”

Tahiri still wasn’t certain they were wrong. “It’s what I told you before. I’m trying to atone. If you really want to help me with that, you’re more than welcome, but that’s what this is about. Cleaning up some of the mess I’ve made. Revenge isn’t part of it.”

“All right. I understand.” Muro pushed herself off the couch with a groan and looked over her bandages. “I’ll help you clean up your mess.”

“Thank you.”

“It will effect my rates though.”

Tahiri smiled a little. “Understood. Thank you, Captain.”

Muro nodded and walked out of the medbay. Tahiri leaned back in her couch, closed her eyes, and waited for the shudder of the hyperdrives to whisk them away.

CHAPTER 20

Tenel Ka was generally not one to pace anxiously, but she found herself doing so now as she and Trista waited in the garden they'd last met in while Taryn made her way directly from the landing bay.

When her cousin arrived, Taryn snapped a quick bow and said with uncharacteristic formality, "Apologies for the delay, Your Majesty. I got her as quickly as I could."

"It's quite all right, Taryn," Tenel Ka waved her hand. "Please, tell me what you found on Gallinore."

Taryn summarized as quickly as she could, describing her visit to the research institute Tenel Ka herself had visited during the Yuuzhan Vong war, along with Jaina, Lowbacca, and Kyp Durrón. Jaina had slipped away several times on that visit, and what Taryn described now seemed to confirm Tenel Ka's growing suspicion that her friend had been meeting with this dangerous, unethical scientist all those years ago. Jaina had been full of anger then over the loss of Anakin and- so she'd thought- Jacen too. Tenel Ka couldn't bring herself to be angry with her friend for an act of dishonesty so long ago, but she did find it a sober reminder of the lengths people went to when afflicted with grief.

She felt some of that anger herself when Taryn described her conversation with Ducha Markessa. Hapan politics was as ever a web of lies and intrigue, suggestions and feints; she'd almost gotten used to it over the years, but finding herself entangled in this web, so fresh after losing Jacen and her father, made her wonder why she hadn't let the Consortium crumble to anarchy a long time ago. Chaos and death was the lot most of the nobles deserved.

She chided herself for the cruel thought and listened to Taryn until the end. When she was done, Tenel Ka looked to the other Zel sister. "Now, Trista, please tell Taryn what you just told me."

Trista nodded. "Of course. I haven't found proof that Ducha Markessa, or any other noble, had been in contact with the Imperials yet, but I have found something more important. Or, I should say, something more important found us."

"Meaning?" asked Taryn.

"I've been working with several of our independent clients operating outside the Consortium," she said, using the polite term for the mercenaries the hermetic Hapans often employed to keep track of outside affairs. "One of them has located the source of the bioweapon. Apparently, they've been receiving help from a Jedi."

"A Jedi?" Taryn frowned and looked to her cousin.

Trista answered instead. "We don't know which. They haven't explained; they just said they've got a Force-user who's been helping them."

Taryn still kept her eyes on Tenel Ka. Her cousin showed nothing; as much as she wanted to know what Jedi was working with their clients, she had no better idea than Trista.

When it became clear her cousin couldn't explain, Taryn asked, "Do we know where Sinsor Khal went?"

"We don't know he's there yet. I've ordered our contractor to head there at once."

"Jedi in tow?"

Trista nodded.

"I would like you both to go as well," Tenel Ka said. "We can wait to investigate Ducha Markessa. This is the highest priority."

"Of course," Taryn nodded. "Where are we going?"

Tenel Ka took a deep breath before pronouncing the word that had become the black hole at the center of her life. "Myrkr."

Taryn's eyes went wide. She knew what Myrkr was, knew something of what Tenel Ka had lost there—though she could never understand the whole of it. Even Tenel Ka couldn't wrap her head around it fully. It hadn't just been Anakin Solo who died there, or the last bits of her youth. More and more since Jacen had begun his fall to the dark, she'd found her dreams taking her back to the moment when he'd followed Vergere to hunt the voxyn queen, pausing before he turned to look at Tenel Ka. They'd seen in each other's eyes the shared desire to lean forward for one kiss, one confession *in extremis* of the desire both of them had had for so long but never allowed themselves to admit to themselves or each other.

But instead of taking that step, Jacen had turned, and she'd let him turn, and she couldn't help but wonder if, someone, it would have all been different after that if they'd stepped forward for that one kiss.

She wondered if she could ever get over her guilt for that broken promise.

"Myrkr," Trista repeated, gently jarring Tenel Ka from her reverie. "Probably on the Yuuzhan Vong worldship, if it's still in orbit. We should get going soon, sister."

“Agreed.” Taryn looked at Tenel Ka with a hint of trepidation. “Cousin, is there anything you can tell us about that worldship? Anything that might guide us?”

Tenel Ka’s mouth was suddenly dry; she swallowed and said, “I have already given a summary of all I remember to Trista. That includes a layout of the inside of the worldship, though if it’s been derelict for fifteen years there’s no telling what’s changed.”

“Of course,” Trista said. “I’ve already prepped *Red Kiss*.”

Taryn nodded; the *Kiss* was a refitted *Barloz*-class freighter with the hull of a second-hand cargo-hauler and the shields, weapon, and speed of Tenel Ka’s own personal transport. Inconspicuous and deadly, it was a favorite of the sisters when they went on missions outside Hapan space.

Trista looked at Tenel Ka and said, “We’ll get there as soon as we can. I promise.”

“I’m still concerned about Markessa,” Taryn said. “She has to know we’re on to her. Plus, we have no way of knowing what Khal did once he joined with the Imps. They could have taken a whole star destroyer to Myrkr.”

Tenel Ka shook her head. “The Moff’s are trying to pretend they’re behaving now that Jagged Fel is in charge. Whatever they’re doing, they’re doing it quietly.”

“Just like Ducha Markessa,” said Taryn. “Still, I’d feel better having backup on standby.”

“Then you should trust your Queen,” Tenel Ka said with a touch of humor. “I’ve ordered Admiral Baas to prepare the *Dragon Queen* for a possible sortie.”

Both sisters looked surprised. Trista said, “*Dragon Queen* still hasn’t been repaired after the nanovirus attack. All the bodies have been removed, yes, but I’d

heard there was talk of decommissioning it, in respect for Allana's death."

Not even the Zel sisters knew that Allana was now in the care of her grandparents; Tenel Ka yearned to tell them the truth, but right now they'd have to think her callous instead.

"*Dragon Queen* has been moved to one of our secure shipyards in the Transitory Mists," he said. "As such, no one will notice if it suddenly disappears."

"Ah," Taryn nodded, "So you'll sneak it out that way."

"Precisely. Of course, I hope I won't need to 'sneak out' at all."

"*You, Your Majesty?*" Trista frowned.

"Of course. Is there a problem with my voyaging on the royal flagship?"

"No. We just, ah—"

"I went to Myrkr once because the fate of the Jedi depended on it," she told them. "I would be remiss not to do so again. If the situation calls for it."

Both of them knew when not to argue with their cousin, their queen. They nodded as one.

"Well," Tenel Ka said, "You'd best get going."

Both sisters snapped a bow and quickly turned to leave. Tenel Ka stood where she was, in the center of the garden, and watched them disappear.

She would see them again. She told herself that because she needed to believe it. With Isolder and Jacen gone, and Allana with her grandparents, the Zel sisters were all the family she had left. And despite it all, despite formally leaving the Order to become a Queen, Tenel Ka still considered herself a Jedi, and she wouldn't abandon another one of her kin to that worldship, no matter who this mystery Jedi ended up being.

If she had to bring *Dragon Queen* to Myrkr to save them, so be it. That planet had already cost her so much it beggared understanding.

Just as her thoughts had been falling back to the kiss she should have given, they'd also been taking her to a conversation not long thereafter, when the survivors of the Myrkr mission were coming to what they thought would be shelter in the Hapes Cluster. It had been clear than Jaina was falling into the darkness of her own anger and despair, and Tenel Ka had read all the conflicting emotions on her friend Zekk's face. She knew that Jaina had long meant to him something like what Jacen had meant to her, and she'd been surprised when Zekk had confessed he planned to leave Hapes as soon as he could.

In a flash of anger she'd accused him of abandoning Jaina when she needed help most, and had then gone on to promise that if Jacen were the one falling to the dark, she'd surely be there to arrest his fall.

The words were a bitter echo now, repeating over and over again in her memory. She'd had no idea, all those years ago, that she could break that promise in the future. Perhaps she'd already broken that promise the moment she failed to kiss Jacen on the worldship. Or perhaps the kiss would have meant nothing, and Jacen was fated to become Caedus as surely as Hapes swung around its sun.

There was no way she would ever know, and no way she could ever heal the pain.

The only thing she had now was a new promise: She would not allow Myrkr to take anything else that she loved.

It had stolen too much already.

CHAPTER 21

From a distance, the worldship over Myrkr looked like almost like a miniature galaxy; its central disc was broad and flat and yorik coral superstructure trailed off in steady curves like spiral arms.

As *Wayward Soldier* got closer, Zekk could see from his place on its bridge that the worldship had indeed changed since he'd last seen it. Two of the spiral arms had broken off entirely and probably fallen toward the planet. A long, wide crack ran from its edge almost to the center of the disc, surely opening a huge chunk of the craft's insides to the vacuum. Zekk hoped the whole thing had emptied into space. It would mean the worldship wouldn't have any more nasty surprises left.

Besides, of course, the bioweapon that had brought him here.

"Bring back any memories?" Praelyx asked, suddenly on Zekk's shoulder.

He scowled and looked at the masquered face. "I was about to ask you the same question."

He was expecting another glib throw-off reply, but instead the Yuuzhan Vong's human eyes narrowed in thought. In a low voice he said, "I haven't seen one of those in... Oh, probably longer than you have."

"I haven't missed it."

“Hmm. Neither have I.”

He looked sidelong at the Vong, still uncertain whether to believe him. “Looks like the hull took a bad breach. For all we know the whole thing’s been spilled into space.”

“If that’s so, then the Imperials wouldn’t be after their bioweapon, would they?”

“This could all be a misfire. Somebody jumping the gun after getting bad or out-of-date intel.”

Praelyx snorted. “Try to believe that if you want, Jedi.”

The captain then turned to his crew and asked for status updates. Reports rang out from different bridge stations, far more raucous and disorganized than any of the military or Jedi ships Zekk had ever served on, but they gave the full picture in the end. Sure enough, most, if not all, of the worldship had been opened to space. No active defenses could be detected. There was a hint of fusial thrust residue around the worldship but there was no sign of any mechanical spacecraft in the vicinity.

According to telemetry readings, the worldship’s orbit around Myrkr was in a state of slow decay and had been for about a decade. Within another decade it would fall into the planet’s gravity well and either burn up in orbit or smash into the surface and devastate whatever continent it landed on.

Zekk wished they had a tractor beam strong enough to pull this thing away from Mykr entirely and send it spinning endlessly in the void, but in the end, they were just one gunship.

“Okay,” Praelyx called once the reports were over, “We hold position here. Chazdrul, tell Harkum to get his boarding team ready.”

“Yes, sir,” the Baragwin said.

Zekk saw rare indecision flicker on Praelyx's face. Then the Vong said, "Tell him we'll be joining him."

Harn blinked his beady eyes. "*We*, sir?"

Praelyx clapped Zekk on the shoulder. "My Jedi friend and me. Just as soon as our clients arrive."

"Your clients?" Zekk stared. "They're coming *here*?"

"My clients like to be hands-on."

Zekk's heart thudded in his chest. He still had no idea who had hired Praelyx- some scheming Hapan Ducha, maybe, or another Imperial Moff, or even Natasi Daala herself. The galaxy was full of beings who wanted to do the Jedi harm.

"I guess," he said, mouth dry, "I won't be getting my lightsaber back any time soon."

"Probably not."

"Will your clients care you've been leading a Jedi around by the leash?"

"I imagine they'll be amused, if anything."

"Do they know about me?"

"I mentioned you briefly. But I won't tell them who you are right away. A big man like you can masquerade as dumb muscle easily enough."

"I guess you'd know a lot about masquerades."

"How right you are."

"So is that what we're going to do now? Just *wait* on your clients?"

"They'll be here soon. They have a fast ship."

"Oh, how comforting." Zekk looked down at his empty hands and squeezed them into fists.

"Whatever role you'll be having on this mission, I want to make one thing clear," Praelyx said. "I'm sending you ahead first."

Zekk blinked. It almost sounded like the Vong was handing him an opportunity to get to the bioweapon first.

"I need someone to set off traps," Praelyx explained.

Zekk's face twisted in a scowl. It was impossible to tell without the Force, but he was pretty sure Praelyx had been getting a kick of taunting him for a while.

Then, as if on cue, Harn announced, "Another vessel has just dropped out of hyperspace. It's a *Barloz*-class freighter."

Praelyx snapped his fingers. "How timely. Tell them they're welcome to couple with our port airlock. Jedi, you're with me. I want to introduce them to our designated trap-springer."

Sullenly, Zekk followed Praelyx through *Wayward Soldier*'s hallways, down the lift to the airlock portal, where two of the Rodians were waiting with their pistols drawn at their sides.

"At least put them in your holsters, gentlemen," Praelyx said. "We don't want to scare our clients."

A bit reluctantly, both Rodians holstered their weapons. Zekk glanced through the small airlock portal to see the metal hull of the freighter pressing close to their ship as it prepared to couple ports.

Awkwardly, Zekk hooked his hands on his belt and asked Praelyx, "Why am I here?"

"I just told you. I want them to meet the man who will take the first amphistaff bite on their behalf."

Zekk scowled and asked no more questions. He still wasn't sure when Praelyx was baiting him and when he was actually trying to hide something.

As the airlock groaned with metal scraping metal he realized what he should have realized all along: He was being presented with the perfect opportunity to get out of here. When Praelyx's clients- whoever they were- came through the airlock he could knock them down with a blast of Force energy, run into their ship, and use it to escape.

Obstacles were numerous, but not insurmountable. He could grab a weapon in the initial fracas, He could seal the airlock from the freighter side. If there were other crew still inside he could disarm them somehow.

Assuming Praelyx didn't shoot him in the back the second he tried something, it just might work.

Zekk braced himself to act, while trying to look like he wasn't. He lowered his hands to his side and kept his open eyes squarely focused on the airlock as the freighter's hatch on rolled open and *Wayward Soldier's* followed suit. There was the pop of air seals breaking and the hiss of pressure equalizing. Then, finally, the second airlock portal swung open.

Zekk heard footsteps approaching and readied himself to act.

Two women stepped through the portal, and he forgot about it all. They looked almost identical, and he knew them to be twins: both red-haired, with strong facial features, green eyes, and red hair like their cousin Tenel Ka. He'd met them only briefly before the battle of Shedu Maad, but he could never forget how the one named Taryn had smiled and squeezed his arm and made her intention very clear. It had been so simple and straightforward- and she'd been so frankly attractive- that it had felt like an electric jolt after months of quietly agonizing over Jaina.

Right then Taryn's eyes met his and went wide, but it was the other sister, Trista, who said, "Captain, how did you acquire this Jedi for your crew?"

Praelyx, for once, looked surprised, and it was extremely gratifying to see. "You know this shaved Wookiee?"

"Not nearly as well as we'd like, but yes," Taryn looked Zekk up and down and said, "You seem hale for a dead man."

"I was pulled from the Transitory Mists after I went EV," Zekk said. He felt like it would be somehow appropriate to thank Praelyx at that point, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Taryn, though, stepped right up to him, gave him another look-over, squeezed his bicep like she'd done that time on Uroro Station, and said to Praelyx, "If we live through this, you're getting a bonus."

"I can live with that." The Yuuzhan Vong glanced at Zekk with a new and sudden respect in his eyes. "If I'd known you were this valuable I'd have tried selling you for ransom."

"I'm sure you'd have gotten around to it eventually." Taryn patted Zekk's arm. "Now, let's get down to business."

"I have a briefing room," Praelyx waved toward the hall.

"Lead the way," Trista said, and let the Yuuzhan Vong go first.

As they walked down the corridor Taryn didn't unhook her arm from Zekk's. His mind was already reeling from one huge surprise but he had enough sense to lean close to her and say, "The captain... You've worked with him before?"

"The Hapans are descended from pirates, you know," she said smoothly, all her shock gone. "They're still useful to employ, especially when we need work done outside Consortium boundaries."

"But Praelyx... What do you know about him?" Zekk whispered.

Taryn raised an eyebrow, faintly curious.

Of course she wouldn't know. Zekk tried to figure how to tell her- whether he *should* tell her- when Praelyx cleared his throat and said, "After you, ladies and gentleman."

A door slid open, revealing the small conference room within. Trista went first, then Taryn hooked Zekk along. As he passed Praelyx leaned a little closer and said, quiet but firm, “Let’s stick to the business at hand, shall we?”

Then the Yuuzhan Vong followed them into the chamber. The door slid shut, sealing them inside. To Zekk, it felt like a signal that the four of them would be stuck together for whatever lay ahead.

CHAPTER 22

Tahiri was dreaming again. She hadn't dreamed since leaving her prison cell but now the damned dreams were back and she was dreaming, of course, about Myrkr.

What else could it possibly be?

It was like the dreams she'd had before, when Riina Kwaad's consciousness was threatening to re-emerge. She was on some dusty chalk plain inside the *Baanu Rass*, looking out at the half-collapsed body of an AT-AT walker that the Yuuzhan Vong had somehow dragged up to the worldship.

And like in that old dream, the AT-AT's rusty head swung to face her as she stood on the chalk dune, and the turbolasers under its chin burst to life and spewed red death right at her. She froze, unable to move, and right when red death was about to hit it became a black ball that hung before her.

And in the old dream a voice had whispered to her, the voice of the Rina Kwaad buried inside her. This time it was a different voice, a male's voice, grating and poisonous. Caedus said to her, "If you could see Anakin one last time, what would you do?"

It was what he'd said to her the first time he'd offered to take her back to *Baanu Rass* to flow-walk, the first

little lure he'd dangled in front of her and like a stupid fish she'd bit down on it, swallowed it, choked on it.

She tried to turn and run from the blackness around her but Caedus held her in place and said, voice bitter and mocking, "You will always be family to us."

Her eyes popped open. She stared at the darkness of the cabin bulkhead until she forced herself to throw away the sweat-damp covers into a corner on her bunk. She staggered out of the room and into the refresher where she washed her face. She stood for a moment in front of the mirror, looking at her own haggard eyes, the scars on her forehead. They seemed to pulse faintly red, as though irritated. Or perhaps she was only imagining. She couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

"At least it wasn't voxyn this time," she whispered to her herself.

Once she'd composed herself and put on her clothes, she went to the cockpit to find both Muro and Vjarna in their seats. The Bimm heard her enter and swiveled in his chair.

"Good timing," he said. "We were just about to call you."

Tahiri flipped a little hair over her shoulder. "Almost at Myrkr?"

"That's right," said Muro. "We revert to realspace in less than a minute."

"Like I said, good timing," Vjarna muttered as he checked his console one last time. "Must be a Jedi thing."

Tahiri wasn't sure he was wrong. She grabbed their chairs by the backs and leaned close. "I realize I should have asked this before, but what kind of weapons does this ship have?"

"She's armed," Muro said. "Two dual-laser turrets, plus concussion missile tubes."

So like the *Falcon*, Tahiri thought warmly. She was surprised by how warmly nostalgic the thought of that ship made her.

"Okay, get ready." Muro reached out and grabbed the throttle at the front of the console. "Entry in three.... Two... one..."

She pulled the throttle back and the blur of hyperpspace became streaks that became stars. Myrkr sat dead ahead of them, only a thin crescent of daylight limning the side of its dark nighttime face. Tahiri was glad she didn't have to see the thing in full daytime splendor, unremarkable though the planet was.

"Where's that worldship?" asked Vjarna, mostly to himself as he checked the scanners.

"Must be around on the daylight side," Muro said. "Hold on. We'll make a curve around."

Mandala kicked speed to its sublight engines as it began to swing through Myrkr's orbit. Tahiri felt something sink in her gut as more and more of the planet's green continents and blue seas became visible.

Because they were coming around the curve *Baanu Rass* was, at first, hard to spot: just a black disc against black space, eclipsing a handful of stars. But as they got closer daylight spilled on its rock-like surface and the spiral-arms that spun out from the main disc.

"Welp," Vjarna said, "There it is."

"Do you know a place to dock?" asked Muro.

Tahiri nodded. "Get a little closer. You see the long crack in the hull? There's a place you can slip inside, then set down on. It will take us pretty close to the shaper laboratory."

"You sure the bioweapon will be in there?"

"I don't know where else it would be."

"Hold up," Vjarna said, "I'm picking up something... It's on the other side of the worldship."

“Another ship?” asked Tahiri.

“Ours or Vong?” Muro said at the same time.

Vjarna shook his head. “Looks like... *Ranger*-class gunship.”

“A *Ranger*?” Tahiri frowned. Those ships had been built for the Alliance, but some had found their way into private hands. Mercenaries could be manning it, and mercenaries could work for anyone- Imperials, rogue Hapans, even Daala.

“They’re hailing us,” Vjarna announced as his board lit up.

“Can we run if we have to?” asked Tahiri.

Muro scowled as she looked at her board. “We can try. They’re got weapons hot and are moving to engage.... Looks like they’ve got a freighter coupled at their airlock though.”

A voice crackled over *Mandala*’s cockpit speakers, saying, “This is Captain Evan Praelyx of the *Wayward Soldier*. State your intention or we will shoot you down.”

Zekk found himself squeezed between two Hapan women as he leaned over the comm console, watching the Yuuzhan Vong on the other side as he watched the gunship’s tactical holo while saying, “This is Captain Evan Praelyx of the *Wayward Soldier*. State your intention or we will shoot you down.”

There was no immediate response. Taryn, all playfulness suddenly gone, said, “Give them an ultimatum. If they can’t prove their intentions, then we blow them from the sky.”

“We can’t do that!” Zekk said quickly. “They might be-”

“They could be working for the Imperials or Ducha Markessa,” the woman said sternly.

“Or they could be someone else. Look at their ship.”

“We’re using a tramp freighter too. That means nothing.” Trista insisted. “It could even be Sinsor Khal.”

A female voice crackled on the speaker, saying, “This is Captain Rahley Muro of the freighter *Mandala*. State *your* business.”

“We’re here to perform salvage on the worldship *Baanu Rass*,” Praelyx said.

The link cut off, as though Muro was talking to someone else in her cockpit. Then she came back, saying, “We have no wish for conflict. Please state your specific goals for *Baanu Rass*.”

“They’re stalling,” Zekk muttered.

“I should remind you,” Praelyx told them, “That my gunship can vaporize yours ten times over. You do not dictate terms here, we do. For whom is your ship contracted?”

The comm went dead again. Taryn leaned close to Zekk and whispered, “Can your Force magic do you any good right now?”

“I’m not sure. We’re too far away from that ship. If we were closer, maybe I could sense something.”

He looked up to see Praelyx watching him, considering, weighing options. The captain said into the comm, “*Mandala*, I will not repeat the question and I already have target lock with our forward missile batteries. Give me the name of your employer in thirty seconds or I will open fire.”

Zekk glanced at the gunnery station and it was as Praelyx said. They were primes to fire and he had no doubt the Yuuzhan Vong captain would carry out his threat.

That kind of preemptive strike would be brash and lethal and so very not Jedi-like. Zekk should have

objected but he didn't. The same dark anger he'd channeled when interrogating Westermal was still there, that smoldering need to reach into the old dark places of himself that could justify anything for the sake of punishing Allana Djo's killers and stopping whoever might seek to use this bioweapon.

He was ashamed of that anger, ashamed of where it could and had one led him, but that did nothing to restrain it.

Then a new voice, still female, said, "This is the contractor. I hired Captain Muro to fly me to Myrkr. This is my mission alone."

Zekk knew that voice. He knew the woman speaking. He'd fought beside her at Myrkr and so many other places, then watched in confusion and dread as she'd fallen under Jacen Solo's sway and turned her back on the Jedi Order to do his evil bidding.

He leaned in close over the speaker grille and said, "Tahiri Veila, cut all engines and hold your position. If you move one more meter we will open fire."

Tahiri's jaw dropped. That voice was like Zekk's, but not. It sounded wrenched by anger and determination, packed with lethal intent.

"Do as he says," she ordered, but Muro had already killed power. She felt anxiety radiating off of both pilots but she tried to push that aside and reach out across cold space to touch Zekk with the Force.

What she felt was just what she'd heard in his voice: anger and determination, and the willingness to do exactly as he'd said.

She turned the comm channel back on and said, "Zekk, this is Tahiri. You can feel me, don't you?"

There was a long moment of dead air. Then Zekk said, "I can feel you, Tahiri."

"Zekk, I'm glad you're alive," she said honestly. "We all thought you were dead."

"I'm hearing that a lot lately," he said gruffly. She didn't know what he meant by that.

The angry determination she felt in the Force didn't abate. She knew what he had to be thinking and tried to open the channel between them, to share her earnest feelings and convince him that she meant no harm.

"Zekk," she said, "I bet we're here for the same thing. I want to find and destroy the Yuuzhan Vong bio-weapon. *Jaina* told me about it. I'm trying to help her, help Tenel Ka and everyone else."

"Prove it."

"You can feel my intentions, can't you? What else would I be here for? I don't want to destroy the Jedi. I'm not doing it for Caedus. He's *dead*."

There was another long pause. She felt something soften within Zekk, and with the softening came a flush of shame. Yet distrust lingered.

"I can't blame you for being angry at me, Zekk. I did terrible things. I know that. But I'm trying to set things right. I'm trying to clean up the last of the mess Caedus made. We want the same thing, Zekk. Please, let us board your ship and talk."

Her voice was nearly cracking toward the end. As she talked she realized that she needed Zekk to forgive her; otherwise there was no chance she could forgive herself.

But the presence she felt in the Force, though softening, was still determined and suspicious. There would be no forgiveness today.

Then Zekk said, "Okay. We'll prepare the starboard hatch for you."

Her knees went weak with relief. "Thank you, Zekk. Thank you so much."

But he didn't respond. The first voice, the captain's, said, "You can go ahead, Jedi. But if you open fire or try to run, we will end you."

Tahiri was too breathless with relief to say anything. Rahley Muro, thankfully, was there to say, "Believe me, Captain Praelyx, we will comply. *Mandala*, out."

PART III

PROMISES

CHAPTER 23

The spiral-armed disc of the Yuuzhan Vong worldship hung against the dark green curve of Myrk's surface. Sunlight caught its jagged surface at an oblique angle, highlighting the crumbling of its yorik coral surface. To Zekk, it frankly looked like an omen.

He was still trying to wrap his mind around all the sudden turns of the past few hours. Tahiri Veila's hired freighter, called *Mandala*, had docked at *Wayward Soldier's* second airlock, and leaving the gunship with a pair of disc-shaped freighters clinging to either flank. Even though Taryn and Trista had confirmed that Tahiri had surrendered to them on Shedu Maad and later been released by Tenel Ka, he found he couldn't bring himself to trust the woman. He couldn't trust Praelyx either, despite the sudden turns, and the only people he could even sort-of trust were Taryn and Trista.

It was not the way he wanted to begin his return to the worldship that had left him with awful memories and lingering nightmares for years to come.

He was one of many now crammed into the cockpit of the Zel's freighter, *Red Kiss*. The sisters took the pilot and co-pilot's seats while Praelyx was strapping into his crash webbing behind Trista and the captain of

Tahiri's transport, a worn but dignified grey-haired woman named Rahley Muro, took the spot behind Taryn. That left Zekk on his feet beside Tahiri; the two stood awkwardly apart and said little, though Zekk could tell she kept on staring at Praelyx, to whom she'd been introduced not ten minutes earlier.

"How much longer until we're ready for lift-off?" she asked.

Trista flipped a few switches above the pilot's seat and said, "No more than five minutes. I want to run one more passive sensor scan before we get any closer to the worldship."

"Good idea." Tahiri looked straight at Praelyx. "Captain, can we have a word in private?"

The masquered Vong turned in his chair and gave her a polite smile. "Are you sure it can't wait?"

"It won't take long."

"I think we can spare a few minutes," said Zekk.

Still smiling politely, Praelyx unbuckled his crash webbing and stood. "Well be right back," he told Trista, who responded with just a distracted nod.

Zekk, Tahiri, and Praelyx moved out of the cockpit. In the rear hold, a half-dozen of Praelyx's privateers were getting ready for the landing, and they captain gave them a short wave as he followed the Jedi to an empty cargo hold in the ship's aft.

Praelyx looked straight at Tahiri. "I've already been through this once with your friend here, but I suppose you want to hear it from me."

"Please." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"I was an intendant during the war. My ship crashed during the battle for Hutt Space. I concealed myself with an oogolith and fell in with a group of Hutt mercenaries."

"And you ended up in command of a pirate ship?"

“Exactly.”

“Pretty unusual fate for a Yuuzhan Vong.”

“My previous career was already starting to lose its appeal. Even if I somehow returned to the Yuuzhan Vong they’d have executed me for surviving when the warriors assigned to me died.”

“I don’t suppose the Zels know about your old life.”

“Of course not.”

“And your crew?”

“Some. I do not flaunt it.”

“I wouldn’t think so. And you insisted on coming to the worldship for what reason? Nostalgia?”

“I was promised a lot of credits for this mission. I want to make sure it succeeds.”

He delivered it with the same aplomb he always used, but Tahiri’s face was skeptical. For the first time Zekk remembered that she possessed a ‘Vongsense’ thanks to the failed attempt to shape her and might be able to sense Praelyx’s true emotions in a way Zekk could not.

“I understand your friend has been on this worldship before,” Praelyx gestured to Zekk. “Is the same true for you?”

Tahiri’s answer was a nod.

“Then you both probably know more of what we’re getting into than I do. I suggest we head back to the cockpit. They should be ready to take off in a minute.”

Praelyx turned and walked out of the hold without looking back. Before Tahiri could follow, Zekk reached out and grabbed her arm.

Leaning in close he asked, “What did you get from him with your Vongsense?”

“I’m not sure. Vongsense isn’t like the Force. I can’t just... *feel* the truth of things. But I don’t think he was lying.” When Zekk didn’t release her arm she asked, “I’m not lying either.”

"I know." He let her go. "Trista and Taryn confirmed what you said."

"Then you know why I'm going down there."

"What about Captain Muro?"

"She has her own score to settle with the Yuuzhan Vong. Maybe this will help her get closure. I hope so."

Zekk didn't know what he expected to find on the worldship, but he doubted it was closure.

"Tahiri, I—" He stopped, unsure of what to say.

"You can trust me Zekk. Really." She held his eyes for a moment, silently pleading, then turned and hurried back to the cockpit.

Zekk followed, and the two of them took their places in the back of the cockpit as *Red Kiss* broke coupling ports with *Wayward Soldier* and accelerated toward the worldship.

He tried to tell himself that yes, he could trust Tahiri, that she was telling the truth, that maybe even Praelyx was trustworthy, but he couldn't believe any of it. He knew, intellectually, that what Tahiri was doing now was a lot like what he'd done almost twenty years ago, after his experience in the Shadow Academy. Back then he'd left behind the Solo twins and his other Jedi friends to sort out his own problems by running as a solitary bounty hunter. He'd fallen back in with his friends after a short time but right then he'd felt he need to distance himself from everyone else and seek restitution in his own way. It was entirely likely that Tahiri was doing the same: trying to work things out alone, in her own way.

But when he felt her in the Force, he still felt the low-simmering anger and hard determination that he remembered from his own sojourn in the dark. Maybe Tahiri was really trying improve herself and didn't realize how deep her own darkness went, how hard it

was to truly escape; if anything that was cause for more concern, not less.

He tried to force his thoughts of all of that as he watched the worldship swell ahead of them. At the co-pilot's station, Taryn was scanning over the sensor output.

"Still some fusial thrust traces," she reported. "Seems like it's old. It's been scattered over space, so I can't get a strong vector."

"I bet they're heading the same place we are," Tahiri said as she leaned forward over Muro's shoulder. "Fly us right into the crack in the hull."

"Can you direct us exactly where to go?" Taryn asked.

She nodded. "I'll show you right where I landed before. It's not far from the shapers' lab."

Red Kiss was close enough to turn on its forward flood-lamps and light up some of the surface of the worldship. It had been so long since Zekk had seen this thing up close, and a shudder went through his spine as he remembered the strike team's desperate landing on its rocky surface, their trek to the spaceport as they watched coralskippers shoot down the captured shuttle piloted by brave, doomed Ulaha Kore.

Ulaha. Her death had rattled the strike team to the core. He hadn't thought about her in months.

Maybe even years.

Tahiri might have been thinking the same thing, or maybe sensed his thoughts in the Force, because she passed him a look of grim, silent understanding.

The fissure in the hull was new, and it was more than wide enough for *Red Kiss* to slip through. It ran for kilometers ahead like a deep canyon, and Trista settled them into a level flight down the breach, toward the center of the disc.

“Look familiar?” Taryn asked, looking back at the two Jedi.

Zekk and Tahiri both crept closer to the viewport. *Red Kiss* swung lights down below, highlighting sweeps of vacuum-dessicated superstructure. He thought he saw long flat dusty wastes, intermixed with a few crevasses that looked almost like dried-up riverbeds. When he saw the angular, boxy structure of the mock-city, he knew exactly what he was looking at.

“This was the training ground they used to teach voxyn to hunt,” he said. “They had rivers and plains, even a fake city full of slaves.”

He remembered, too, how the Yuuzhan Vong pursuit party had ambushed them in the city as the Jedi, being Jedi, were distracted trying to help all the slaves that were being used as meals for the voxyn. The Vong had killed Jovan Drark and Eryl Besa: two more people Zekk hadn’t thought of in forever. That had also been the place where Anakin Solo took the lance-wound that ended up a death sentence.

Zekk glanced at Tahiri. Her face was stiff and she gave off nothing in the Force. But then, she’d seen this place not so long ago, when Caedus had taken her flow-walking back to Anakin’s last moments.

Taryn probably had that in mind when she asked, “Well, what’s next?”

“We’re getting close to where the lab is. There’s going to be a big wall coming up. The lab is on the other side. There’s a big flat plain where we can set down.”

“And this is all open to the vacuum?” Muro asked.

“That’s right. We’ll need to seal our vac suits.” They had all dressed in thermo-jumpsuits before leaving *Wayward Soldier*, but they still had to put on the vacuum-proof helmets kept in a pile in the main hold.

“Do we know what we’re looking for is *actually* in the lab?” asked Praelyx.

“No,” Tahiri admitted, “But it’s the best place I can think of to start.”

“If we’re picking up dispersed thrust trails it’s possible Khal and the Imperials have already been here and grabbed the bioweapon.”

“They didn’t get that much of a head start,” Taryn said defensively.

“Also, I doubt they could just grab it and go,” said Tahiri. “That weapon was never completed by Yal Phaath. Otherwise they would have tried to use it. What’s in there is a template. That’s why the Imps brought along Sinsor Khal. They need somebody with enough knowledge of Yuuzhan Vong bioscience to complete it for them, and I’d bet good money that Khal would want to stay on *Baanu Rass* so he can use as much native equipment as he can get his hands on to finish the project.”

She spoke with enough authority to silence any more doubters. *Red Kiss* began to drop altitude and slip lower, beyond the jagged canyon-walls of the crack and into the interior of the worldship itself.

It was Taryn who spoke next, her voice uncharacteristically tense. “I’m getting a new reading. Looks like something metallic.”

Zekk looked at Tahiri. “Any idea?”

“No,” she shook her blond head. “We should assume it’s hostile.”

“Shields up,” Trista announced, flipping two overhead switches. “Arming weapons.”

Muro and Praelyx shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. Zekk wanted to ask the Vong captain whether he was regretting his decision to come aboard, but now wasn’t the time.

“What do we have, sister?” asked Trista as her hands gripped the control yoke tightly.

“I’m not sure.” Taryn frowned. “It’s almost like they’ve raised a low-intensity jamming field.”

“They’re probably in the labs already,” Tahiri said. “We should signal for-”

“Incoming missile!” Taryn shouted as a proximity alarm started to wail.

Trista pulled *Red Kiss* into steep upward climb, vectoring back to the narrowing canyon-walls of the breach. Before they could get there, their shields shuddered under heavy impact. The ship went tumbling for a minute before Trista could wrest it back under control; by that time they’d been knocked off-course and found themselves flying upward toward a thick yorik coral flight ceiling.

“Another one!” Taryn announced as Trista snapped them into a sideways roll. Tahiri was slammed into Zekk who in turn slammed against the bulkhead hard enough to split the skin on his forehead and draw blood. *Red Kiss* shuddered once again, this time so hard that Tahiri and Zekk were thrown into the opposite bulkhead as the freighter started tumbling toward the plain below.

“What happened to the shields?” asked Muro.

“Still holding, barely,” Trista grimaced. “Sister, where are they? Who’s shooting at us?”

Taryn kept her eyes glued to the scanners. “I see them. One assault shuttle, on the ground... Two kilometers ahead, eighty degrees.”

“Good. Get ready to give them a missile of our own.”

“Gladly, sister.”

Zekk and Tahiri, knocked around and tangled up in the back of the cockpit, extricated themselves from

each other's limbs and surveyed the damage. Zekk was bleeding from his forehead and he could feel blood tickling as it caught in his eyebrow. Tahiri was bruised on one cheek but that was about it.

Muro grabbed the back of Taryn's seat. "Do we have to destroy them? We could try and capture them—"

"They're trying to kill us," the Hapan woman snapped. "I'm going to kill them right back. End of story."

Without warning, Trista dropped *Red Kiss* into a steep dive. The viewport was filled with the approaching plain, and the proximity alarm began to wail with the approach of yet another missile.

"Power doubled to dorsal shields," Trista announced. "Sister, do you have the target?"

"I have it," the other woman said, though Zekk still couldn't see the shuttle ahead.

"Fire when ready, sister," Trista gritted her teeth.

Taryn didn't need to be told twice. *Red Kiss* shuddered as a pair of concussion missiles streaked out from its ventral launch bay. Projectiles shot straight ahead on red streaks as Trista threw the freighter into one more twist, firing upward with its automated laser cannons to catch the missile Zekk could see looping down on them.

Dark space lit up all at once. A chain of laserfire caught the missile, detonating it a second before it could shatter *Red Kiss*' shields. At the same time, the two missiles dead ahead burst; in their short illumination Zekk could spot the shiny, angular hull of an Imperial *Gamma*-class assault shuttle.

"Did we hit it?" asked Tahiri.

"Looks like they sent up some chaff," Praelyx said.

"We didn't score a direct hit, but that thing can't raise shields on the ground," Taryn reported. "It should

have taken some damage, unless they're jamming our tracking systems."

"Is it still on the ground?" asked Muro.

"Still there," Taryn confirmed. "If they haven't run they've got to have people on the ground."

Trista pulled *Red Kiss* around in a tight loop. "Got another one in the tube, sister?"

"Getting a lock now."

"One more incoming!" Trista announced. "Any time, sister!"

"Got it!" Taryn said, and two more missiles lanced out.

Zekk could see it through the viewport: two missiles riding red tails, slicing past one headed the opposite direction. Trista swung *Red Kiss* upward as the missile flashed close-

-the explosion threw Zekk nearly onto Muro's shoulder. The freighter was tumbling, tumbling toward the plain that was coming up fast. He heard a hard pop somewhere and the whine of oxygen rushing through a hull breach, but all he could think about was the surface rushing toward them. Trista was swearing and Taryn pounding her console; Muro was a beacon of raw fear in the Force.

And Tahiri, gripping the back of Praelyx's seat hard, was focusing.

Zekk followed her lead. He found one still place in the panic and *grabbed* the freighter's nose, pulling it upward. He couldn't keep the ship from crashing, but he could at least prevent all of them from getting killed when the cockpit slammed into the ground at critical velocity.

His gut tried to jump out of his throat as *Red Kiss* belly-flopped onto the hard plain. It continued to scrape and slide across the rough ground until finally

coming to a rest. The ship's interior lights shuddered and went dark and the roar of the engines dwindled to nothing. Suddenly the only sound was the panting of the people in the cockpit and the distant whine of escaping air.

Then a set of dim emergency lights kicked on, casting the room in an appropriately dire shade of red. Voice cracking, Zekk asked, "Is everyone all right?"

"Shockingly," Praelyx groaned, Muro nodded, and Tahiri sent Zekk gratitude through the Force.

As for the Zel sisters, Taryn was unbuckling her crash webbing while Trista stared grimly at the controls to her ship.

"I take it we won't be going anywhere soon," Zekk said.

"We're still losing oxygen, and the Imps are still out there." Trista said. "Everyone needs to seal their vac suits. *Now.*"

CHAPTER 24

Praelyx's mercenaries has been smarter than anyone else. The moment the first missile had been fired, all six of them strapped themselves into crash couches and sealed their vac suits in anticipation of a breach. All six had come through unscathed, which was more than the six in the cockpit could claim.

Tahiri and Zekk needed the most patch-up, and they had to apply some bacta salve to their wounds quickly before slipping on their helmets. By the time they were ready to go, Praelyx had already gathered his men at the port-side docking airlock they'd exit through, as the landing ramp was probably crushed and crumpled at the bottom of the ship.

There wasn't enough room for a dozen beings in bulky vac suits to crowd in the airlock vestibule, but as the gathering spilled out into the hallway, Trista was barking out orders so loudly it made the comlink in Tahiri's ear shudder.

"I'm going to need two volunteers!" The Hapan woman announced as she stood in the middle of the group. "I need people with mechanical expertise to help me scour this ship, seal the breaches, and see what we can salvage."

Two hands went up: a Snivvian and a human. Trista pointed toward the cockpit, and the two of them shouldered free of their peers and into the hallway.

"Everyone else," she announced, "Go with Taryn. She's now team leader. The Imp shuttle that shot us down should still be sitting dirtbound less than a kilometer away. It might be even more knocked up than us, but if it's not, do whatever you can to capture it."

"Double-check to make sure you have all weapons and equipment!" Taryn added. "Once we go through that airlock we're not coming back until we have Sinsor Khal dead or alive."

Tahiri felt a surprising confidence from Praelyx's four remaining mercenaries: three Rodians and one blue-skinned red-haired humanoid. Getting through the crash unscathed probably helped with that, because Tahiri was aching and rattled and in no way confident that her latest visit to *Baanu Rass* wasn't going to go as badly as all the others.

As the group filed out onto the dusty plain, Taryn and Zekk took the lead. Through the bubble of their helmets she thought she saw their lips move; they must have been speaking on a private channel. Praelyx and his four men followed next. Tahiri brought up the rear, shuffling alongside Muro. The older woman had strapped a long T-21 repeating blaster on her shoulder and she held it like she was ready to use it.

Muro was bottling up her emotions like she always did, so it was hard to get a sense of her in the Force. Keeping pace with her, Tahiri switched the comm to the woman's channel and said, "I'm sorry for dragging you into this."

"You didn't drag me into anything," Muro said, not looking at Tahiri, eyes straight ahead. "Coming down was my stupid choice."

“Still. You wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

“I’m here because I have my own stupid baggage against the Vong I can’t let go of.” She slowed and finally looked at Tahiri. “I thought I was over it. I guess not.”

“Maybe I’ve been rubbing off on you then,” Tahiri smiled apologetically.

“Maybe.” Muro looked ahead again. “Well, at least Vjarna’s safe. He’s probably catching rack time on *Mandala* right now.”

“That or playing sabacc with a bunch of pirates on the gunship.” Tahiri smiled at the mental image of the little Bimm surrounded by so many hulking thugs and taking their money.

Muro must have had it too; she allowed a rare smile. “Revli’s always been lucky like that. Always thought his luck was rubbing off one me.”

“Should have brought him down then.”

“Then who would clean out all those pirates?”

Tahiri chuckled and was about to say something more when her earpiece pinged with another comm request. She switched to the new freq and asked, “What is it?”

“We’re going to need you up front, Tahiri,” said Zekk.

“Of course. I’ll be right up.” She switched her freq back to Muro’s and said, “Got to go play guide. Stay in the back for now. It’s safer.”

“Sounds good to me,” Muro said, almost cheery.

As Tahiri trekked past Praelyx and his thugs she allowed herself to wonder, not for the first time, what it would be like to lead a life like Muro’s: independent, free-roaming, accountable to no-one. Muro might not have been the friendliest woman but she was the weathered and durable captain of her own ship, literally and figuratively. Tahiri wouldn’t mind ending

up like that herself one day; at the moment it certainly seemed more appealing than any of her past iterations.

But she left Muro behind to take a place in between Zekk and Taryn. As soon as she got there and before she could say anything, the Hapan woman raised a hand, palm flat, signaling everyone to stop. She dropped to one knee, and everyone else followed.

The vac suit she'd brought with her from *Red Kiss* was much better than the hand-me-down Tahiri had borrowed from *Mandala*. She wore a band tight around her forehead that dropped a thin translucent visor over her eyes. Tahiri watched the tiny lights of the heads-up-display inside the visor flickered, showing Taryn something of what lay ahead.

"That shuttle is still grounded," she announced. "I count two people moving around outside."

Suddenly Praelyx was there, on his knees beside her. "What kind of damage did we do?"

"I don't think we cracked it open, which is welcome in retrospect." Taryn's eyes narrowed as she watched something else flash across her visor. "I see someone inside the cockpit also."

"Probably the rodder that shot us down," said Zekk.

"That means he can man the guns again," Tahiri said. "We need to scatter and encircle the shuttle on all sides."

"Agreed," Taryn nodded. "Zekk, stay with me. We'll go around to the left. Captain Praelyx, take our other Jedi and head for the right. Take two of your soldiers too."

"What about Captain Muro and the others?" asked Tahiri.

"Have them approach straight ahead, slowly. That kind of shuttle was designed to deploy in combat zones,

which means its anti-personnel cannons have a full range of fire.”

“Lovely,” Zekk grunted.

“I’m hoping we did *some* damage, enough to knock the targeting systems out of sync or destroy a few turrets entirely.” Taryn bit her lip in a rare show of agitation. “There’s only one way to find out.”

Praelyx checked his heavy T-21 blasted and said, “Let’s get started, then.”

After Praelyx gave his men initial instructions, the group spread out in total comm silence. Tahiri and the Yuuzhan Vong walked in a long arc around the parked shuttle with their helpers, a pair of Rodians with long-range sniper rifles. She couldn’t help but be reminded of Jovan Drark, the Rodian Jedi and who’d been the strike team’s sharpshooter on the mission to kill the voyxn queen, and had been either the second or third to die; she could no longer remember.

The plain around the shaper laboratory was a dusty, lightly-undulating expanse, as it had been even before the hull breach had opened it to the vacuum. The glow of Myrkr fell through the giant chasm over their heads, casting the entire field in an eerie shade of green.

She tried to reach out to get a feel on Praelyx. Zekk clearly stilled viewed him with suspicion, but Tahiri was more fascinated than anything else. On Zonoma Sekot she’d seen all kinds of ways individual Yuuzhan Vong from every caste reacted to the end of the war and the collapse of their civilization, but she’d never seen one walk away from everything he’d ever been as casually as Praelyx. In a way it made her jealous.

Right now she felt only cool determination coming from the captain, which made sense under the circumstances. It had been over five years since she’d had opportunity to use her Vongsense, the vague telepathy

she'd learned to channel after her time in the Yavin 4 shaper laboratory. It was like the Force, but not, and she could never open herself to both senses at once. It was as though they existed on totally different frequencies of her perception. The same had been true for Jacen's Vongsense, and the dim connection Anakin had felt through the Yuuzhan Vong lambent crystal in his lightsaber. She'd always felt that if she could channel both Vongsense and the Force at once, it would make her feel less bifurcated, more whole.

A hand tapped her shoulder, jarring her out of her thoughts. Praelyx tapped his helmet and leaned close so his transparisteel bulb touched hers.

"We'll move in on the Hapan's signal. Have your lightsaber ready." The vibration of his voice passed from his helmet to hers, giving it a hollow, tinny sound.

Without moving her helmet she glanced at the assault shuttle. Given the distance and the dim green light, it was still hard to make out any people moving around outside, and she had to reach out with the Force to sense their presence.

"I've heard Jedi can catch laser blasts with those." Praelyx pointed at her weapon. "I'll need you to provide cover."

"Did you ever fight Jedi, back in the war?" She knew it wasn't the time, but she couldn't help herself.

The captain shook his head. "I told you, I was assigned to the conquest of Hutt Space. Not many Jedi there."

"So you never saw a one?"

He snorted. "Does that surprise you?"

"Well, I saw plenty of *your* kind during the war."

"And why do you assume they're *my* kind?"

Before she could find an answer, Taryn Zel's voice whispered in her ear. "All groups check in."

“Group Two ready,” Praelyx said quickly, glancing at either side to see his Rodian snipers laying on their bellies, rifle-barrels resting on ridge-crests.

“Group Three ready,” came the voice of the blue-skinned humanoid, Harkum.

Tahiri unhooked her lightsaber from her belt and readied to ignite it. Once it came on, she knew, she’d become a beacon for whatever cannons the assault shuttle could bring on her.

Then Taryn said, “Go!”

Tahiri and Praelyx ran ahead, as fast as they could in their bulky vac suits. Her lightsaber sprung to life in her hand, curiously soundless in the vacuum. Behind them, the two Rodians opened fire. Laser-blasts flashed past the two runners, and Tahiri watched their bright lances converge on a man in a vac suit she hadn’t even seen, standing with his back against the shuttle. He dropped in an instant; Tahiri and Praelyx kept running.

For a long, hopeful moment she thought they were safe, that the shuttle’s defensive turrets were dead, and that all they’d have to do was bust open the shuttle airlock and ride home on it.

And of course, just as she thought that, the cannons on the boxy shuttle’s corners swung to life and began raking laserfire across the plain. Tahiri stopped and threw up her lightsaber; she caught one blast and was instantly staggered back by the sheer kinetic force of the heavy cannon shot. Praelyx dropped to his knee behind her and fired two shots from his T-21, aiming for the weapon emplacements. It was a long range to the target and his shots went wide. Tahiri barely registered the guns going off on the shuttle’s other side, probably firing at Zekk and Taryn; it took all her energy to concentrate on each blast and deflect it as it came to her.

She saw sparks flash on one of the turrets as some laser shots- probably from the Rodians- hit home. The turret's mechanisms sputtered and she saw the long gun barrel stutter as it tried to turn and track her.

The momentary elation she felt vanished when the remaining turret sprayed laser blasts far to her right; she saw the flash of an explosion and felt one of the Rodians wink out in the Force.

Suddenly it all came back: Jovan Drark impaled by an amphistaff, Eryl Besa catching a thud bug across the face, all the frenzy and death and horror of the first Myrkr mission. In her fear and anger she found energy, and without shouting warning to Praelyx she ran forward. The remaining turret spun to track her but she ran fast, using the Force to propel her past natural human speed, accelerating each leap through the dying worldship's low gravity. At the same time the two shooters behind her kept firing at the turrets in hopes of crippling them.

Tahiri had a better plan. When she got close enough she dropped low and rolled through the dust, bringing her so close to the assault shuttle that she was inside the turrets' firing range. Lightsaber still ignited, she leaped up and shearing the active cannon barrel straight off. One more stab, straight up and through, killed the turret for good, neatly severing its connection to the gunnery computer.

After that, it was easy to come up alongside the already-crippled turret and do the same.

She felt triumph surge through her and raced around the outside of the shuttle, eager to take out the other turrets and claim her victory. As she crossed beneath the shuttle's cockpit she was tempted to hurl her saber through the transparisteel viewport, shattering it and opening the shuttle and its pilot to the vacuum.

Then she felt another life wink out, someone from Muro's group- not the captain, one of Praelyx's men. The sudden pain, and its sudden disappearance, shocked Tahiri back to her senses. She ran around to the other side of the shuttle and immediately hurled her saber into the air. It pinwheeled through the empty vacuum, slicing the barrel clean off one turret, and with an extra Force-push she tore open the second turret too.

The lightsaber spun back in her hand, smacking into her palm. She gripped it with both hands and spun on the defenseless shuttle, eager to cleave open its hull and spill its guts into space.

"Tahiri, stop!" Zekk's voice resounded in her ear.

She stopped and turned around. He was coming up behind her, lightsaber bobbing as he ran. Panting, he repeated, "Stop, Tahiri. Just wait."

She realized she was panting from exertion. She lowered her weapon to her side but didn't deactivate it.

"All shuttle defenses are down," Tahiri said. "We can go in any time."

"Exactly," Taryn said sternly as she came up behind Zekk. "There's no cause to rush."

When he got close enough, Tahiri could see the expression on Zekk's face. It was stern and disapproving, and she knew why. She'd drawn on her fear and anger during that attack, just like Jacen- like Caedus- had trained her to do. Just like Zekk had learned too, at the Shadow Academy, when he was much younger. It had been easy then and it was easier now; it had gotten the job done and saved lives. She wanted to rebuke Zekk verbally but for now she just closed herself off from him in the Force.

"Good work, Jedi," Praelyx said as he rounded the shuttle's nose. "I've waited a long time to see your kind in action. I wasn't disappointed."

Being congratulated by the Yuuzhan Vong, not scolded by a Jedi, gave Tahiri a twinge of conscience, but before she would ponder what *that* said about her, Taryn went right up to the main airlock. She seemed to ponder it while Muro and Harkum came to meet them; then she reached out and, almost politely, rapped her knuckles on the hatch.

After thirty seconds she knocked again. They waited for almost a minute more before Praelyx looked to Zekk and said, "I know you can open doors on *my* ship. How about airlocks?"

Zekk pursed his lips. "The mechanism for these should be pretty simply, actually."

"Then use your magic and get us inside."

Zekk glanced at Taryn, who nodded approval. He walked straight up to the hatch and placed both gloved palms flat on the durasteel. He closed his eyes and Tahiri could feel him reach out with the Force to sense the heavy locking mechanisms that sealed the door in place. Growing up in the underworld of Coruscant, Zekk had been a scrapper, a tinkerer, a boy who knew his way around foreign machinery. Clearly he'd carried that skill with him here; Tahiri couldn't help but feel impressed as the outer airlock hatch swung open, revealing the sealed vestibule.

"Well," Zekk said, "Halfway there."

"Very impressive," Taryn positively cooed as she squeezed his arm. It was hard to tell in this light, but it looked like Zekk actually blushed.

They clambered into the vestibule and manually closed the airlock behind them. Once they were sealed from the outside, Zekk started work on the second door. That time Taryn and Harkum stood behind him, blasters aimed and ready to fire past his flanks and drop the Imperial who was waiting on the other side.

Zekk opened the door a crack at first, and the hissing sound of equalizing air pressure filled the chamber. Tahiri stretched out with the Force and sensed the ship's sole remaining crew member in the cockpit, not waiting for them in the cabin.

She shared the sensation with Zekk, and he greeted it with a silent nod. Then he gave the door one last shove with the Force and it slid aside.

He went in first, lightsaber held high. The Taryn and Harkum followed. Then spun around the corner and went quickly for the cockpit. Tahiri spotted the head and shoulders of the pilot right before he raised his gun to spray red laser blasts in their direction.

Zekk deflected shots into the ceiling and Taryn dropped low. She sent out a single blue stun-shot that caught the pilot in the chest. He immediately went limp in his chair; his gun spilled from his hand and clattered to the floor.

"Excellent," said the Hapan woman as she popped to her feet. "Take that man in the back and bind him. We'll have plenty of questions when he wakes up."

Praelyx went right for the comm station. "Right now I'd like to tell my crew that I'm not, in fact, dead."

"Bet they're raiding your room for stuff right now, Boss," said Harkum as he stuffed his pistol into his belt and unsealed his helmet.

"Not yet. Harn knows how to keep them in line." The Yuuzhan Vong popped off his helmet and set it on the console. He worked the controls practiced with ease.

"What about the two you lost?" Zekk asked from over his shoulder.

"Neevo's out there now," said Harkum. "He'll bring them inside."

Tahiri took off her helmet and looked at Muro while Praelyx, Zekk, and Taryn all crowded around the

controls. She sidled next to the older woman and said, "That was a close one."

"You did good," Muro nodded. "Without you we would have lost more."

She wished someone would tell that to Zekk, but they could argue about that later. Up in the cockpit, Praelyx started saying, "*Wayward Soldier*, please respond. This is your captain. *Soldier*, respond."

After a second a crackling voice replied, "Good to hear from you, sir."

"Right back at you, Harn," Praelyx shot a confident look around the shuttle. "We ran into some problems landing but we've secured the Imperial shuttle."

"What about the package?"

"Elsewhere. We'll still have to search the worldship. This could take time. How are things in orbit?"

"Skies are clear."

"Good. Hold position for now. We'll be in touch." He switched off the link and asked Taryn, "Anything else?"

The woman considered, then shook her head. "Trista will contact my personal comm when she needs to."

Muro said, "I'd like to wing a message to my ship. I want to give my first officer an update."

"I'm sure Harn will pass the word."

"I also want to warn him we made need pickup," Muro took a step for the comm system.

"Very well," Praelyx stepped aside obligingly and let the other captain hunch over the comm console. As she worked he asked Taryn, "Well, how does it look? Will this ship get us out of here?"

"All systems look optimal."

"So your weapons didn't make a dent?"

"No, but I don't mind that right now. We'll learn more when our pilot wakes up."

"I don't want to wait for that," said Zekk. "Whoever else is on this worldship, they've probably been warned we're coming. We should leave a guard or two on the shuttle and head for the shapers' lab."

"Agreed," Tahiri said, though she had no desire at all to go there.

"All right, I'll come with," said Harkum. "We'll leave Neevo here. He can watch his boys' bodies and, uh, question the Imp when he wakes up."

As Muro stepped away from the comm console, Tahiri told her, "You should probably stay here too. It will be safer."

To her surprise, the older woman shook her head. "No. I didn't come all this way to babysit a knocked-out Imperial."

"We have no idea what we might face in there," Tahiri said, looking to the others for support, but she got none. "We also have no idea how many troopers the Imperials have running around."

"All the more reason to bring another person."

Tahiri fought a scowl and reached out with the Force to get a sense of Muro's mindset. As usual, the woman was hard to read, but she radiated a stony resolve.

Praelyx decided the matter by announcing, "The more the merrier. Now come on, let's get going."

Just as quickly as they'd boarded the secured the shuttle, they made final checks, re-sealed their suits, and cycled through the airlock. Tahiri and Zekk were the first two to step outside. The Rodian Neevo was there, dragging the bodies by their feet across the plain. Tahiri wished she could have stayed to help him, but she knew none of them had enough time. There was no doubt Khal was somewhere inside the cracked-open worldship, developing his weapon as Caedus had requested.

Zekk put a palm on her shoulder, surprising her. Tahiri jerked under his hand and looked up at him.

"I'm fine," she said defensively.

"I didn't come here to judge you, Tahiri," said Zekk.

She glanced at her wrist controls to make sure she and Zekk were on a secure channel. "I did what I had to. We could have had even more dead."

"I know. I also know how easy it is to justify using your anger as power."

"That was a long time ago for you."

"It doesn't make a difference."

She wanted to say it did. For as long as she could remember, Zekk had been one of the most straight-and-narrow Jedi she'd known. His brush with the dark side as a youth had left him with a lingering conservatism; it was why he'd been adamant against using anything touched by the dark during their first trip to this worldship and it was why she felt wary of him now.

"I know how easy it is," Zekk said. "Just yesterday I used my anger over everything that's happened recently to pry into a prisoner's mind."

"Then you should understand."

"I understand why I have to keep that part of myself in check. You should too. Promise me you won't do that again, Tahiri, please."

She fought a scowl. Another promise was the last thing she wanted to make here, in this worldship where she'd already broken her most important one.

Suddenly Praelyx's voice rang in both their ears, saying, "Let's go, Jedi. No time to waste."

They turned and saw the Yuuzhan Vong, the freighter pilot, and the Hapan woman staring at them expectantly.

Taryn said, "The captain's right. Who wants to lead the way to the shaper lab?"

"I'll do it," Tahiri said.

"Then lead the way."

She turned from Zekk and took the head of the column. It was natural she'd act as guide here; after all, she'd already walked his barren path with Caedus just months ago.

She felt some foreboding as she walked it yet again, but mostly she was just thankful to Taryn, thankful that she hadn't been forced to make one more promise she couldn't keep.

CHAPTER 25

As they crested the rim of the crater and descended into the shapers' laboratory, Zekk couldn't help but think about the last time he'd been in this awful place.

The passing time had not been kind to it; that made him feel better somehow. The frigid vacuum had denuded it of the dense humid air, the nutrient vines that had dangled like streamers from the ceiling into gestation bins, the hedge-walls of dense thorn-plants. Some frozen withered remnants of the grashal's original life remained, but what Zekk saw now was, for the most part, just a barren pocket in a barren landscape, rendered more surreal by Myrkr's green reflected glow and the long shadows cast by tethers of dead vegetation.

Tahiri had been trying to shield her emotions from him since the fight at the shuttle, but now she was positively bleeding into the Force. She felt like she was walking through a gallery of ghosts, each one raising terrible specters of old nightmares. He realized that Tahiri had, quite literally, walked that gallery already, when Caedus had taken her back here to flow-walk back to Anakin's death.

Zekk switched to her private comm channel and said, "Tahiri? Are you okay?"

He saw her jerk inside her vac suit. With a stutter she said, "Yes. Yes, I'm fine."

"Were you... flow-walking just now?"

Her head shifted from side to side. "No. He never taught me how. But I... I remember it, Zekk. It's so vivid."

She sounded entranced and terrified at once, and he felt a pang of sympathy for her. Ever since their unexpected reunion he'd been vacillating back and forth on Tahiri, at one moment empathizing with her struggle to move beyond the darkness in her past, at the other angry at her for being weak and falling under Caedus' spell. He didn't even know how much of it was really anger at Tahiri and how much was anger at Jacen, the friend who'd turned traitor, the one who was no longer here to accept blame for all he'd done. Without Caedus, Tahiri was an acceptable substitute. In his angrier moments he wondered why Daala or the Imperials hadn't sought to punish her for exactly that reason.

"Look," said Taryn from the front of the line. "Definitely some people here. These footprints look fresh."

Zekk stepped ahead and came to her side. He switched his comm to the common freq and said, "How many do you think?"

Praelyx joined them to examine the pattern of boots in the dust. There had clearly been a lot of activity, moving in multiple directions. It was a good bet the Imperial team had simply scoured the entire lab over on arrival.

"Look at that." Taryn bent and pointed to a specific set of footprints. "That's a different pattern than the other boots. The rest are probably standard Imp issue. My guess is Sinsor Khal brought his own vac suit."

“Which probably means he expected to take a trip,” muttered Zekk.

“We’ll deal with Ducha Markessa another time,” said Taryn as she stood straight. “Right now we need to find where they went. There has to be tunnels that go deeper into the worldship.”

Zekk and Tahiri glanced at each other across the gloom. Tahiri said, “There were a couple entrances, including ones that led to warrens filled with feral voxyn. That’s what we used to retreat, after...”

After Anakin died.

She couldn’t finish, so Zekk said, “We could start there, but there might be other tunnels. The best option is to follow the footprints. So, let’s spread out. Search the area until we find a passage. My guess is that some parts of this ship still have air pressure and temperature to keep the bioweapon samples alive, so we need to find those.”

“We can scan for heat signatures,” Praelyx suggested. “This area is cold as space, so anything with even minimal air levels is going to shine like a beacon on IR scopes.”

“I’ve got sensors for that,” volunteered Harkum. “Let’s get looking.”

“Yes,” said Taryn testily, “Let’s.”

Zek had forgotten what it was like dealing with Hapan women. As the group started to fan out to scour the lab, he switched his personal comm to Taryn’s freq and said, “No one was ignoring your authority here. We just want to get this done.”

“I’m aware, but I am still leading this mission-”

“-And we’re still lowly males, I know.” He rolled his eyes.

“It’s good to see you know your place.” To his surprise, he heard amusement in her voice.

“Well, just for this mission,” Zekk muttered as he began to look over the footprints. “Once we’re done with this I’m going back to the Jedi.”

“A shame,” she sniffed. “What do you have waiting for you there?”

“You know, I already had this same conversation with Praelyx a little while ago.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He looked up at her. She was right; it wasn’t an answer because, just now, he couldn’t come up with one. He’d spent so long chasing after Jaina- chasing after the ghost of what he’d had almost twenty years ago- that he’d forgotten what had motivated him before that.

“I *am* a Jedi,” he said stiffly. “Where else would I belong?”

“Tenel Ka is a Jedi. She could use good help on Hapes. And good friends.”

He’d never thought of that before, and he struggled to find reason to reject it. Rather than fumble to answer another question he couldn’t, he put false bravado in his voice and asked, “What about you?”

“Me?”

“Sure. What’s in it for you if I got back to Hapes?”

“I’d better serve my family and my Queen. And I could broaden my horizons.” Her lips hinted a smile. “You could too. I think you need to get over the Solo woman.”

She’d gone right up to the bantha in the room and kicked it. “I am,” he said firmly.

“Good. She’s too short for you.”

“She’s *what*?”

“You heard me.” Taryn looked him up and down with a gleam in her eye. “Leave her to Fel, or someone who doesn’t have to bend halfway over to kiss her.”

Zekk stared and realized for the first time, that Taryn was quite tall. Not outstandingly so, not for a Hapan woman, but, for *normal* human women, she was tall.

She saw he had no reply and smirked like she'd won the argument.

Zekk's comm buzzed with a new transmission. He changed his channel and asked, "Yes, what is it?"

"If you two can stop flirting, Captain Muro's found the passage," Tahiri said dryly.

"Flirting?" He checked his comm channel again. "Were we-"

"I didn't need *ears*, Zekk."

"Oh, right."

"Just don't forget the reason we're here."

As he and Taryn followed Tahiri over to the passage Muro had found, Zekk hoped that exchange hadn't been as plain to everyone else in the group. He'd have a hard time looking either Tahiri or Taryn in the eye for a little while, but despite his embarrassment that conversation had left him with a faint, happy glow. It had been enough to distract him from this dark crater full of ghosts, which was what he'd so sorely needed.

He wasn't sure if Taryn had understood that and being trying to help him, or if Taryn was just being Taryn. Either way, he tried to cling to that faint glow as the group descended single-file down the narrow passage, deep into the dark.

CHAPTER 26

Chazdrul Harn had spent the past six years as *Wayward Soldier*'s first officer, and in that capacity he'd had a chance to work with Evan Praelyx on all manner of missions, from straight-up piracy to scout jobs to intel-gathering for their Hapan clients. In all that time the one place their work hadn't taken them to was his boss's old prowling ground, which was why the sight of the huge Yuuzhan Vong worldship orbiting Myrkr filled him with a sense of quiet dread.

Praelyx had revealed his origins about five years back, and Harn liked to think he took it better than most beings would. Baragwin had a reputation of being pragmatic, level-headed, and basically unflappable, and Harn generally tried to live up to the stereotype; back during the Vong War he'd run with the Peace Brigade for a while, so he wasn't averse to dealing with the race on principle. The viciousness of the warrior caste had always been a turn-off but the intendants, of which Praelyx had once been a member, were generally a lot more reasonable.

And, all things considered, Praelyx was a lot more reasonable than other bosses Harn had worked under. He had a good, fast, well-armed gunship to prowl around on and he spread payments pretty generously

amongst the crew, with a special bonus for his first officer. So, in summary, he was not a bad being to work with, and his being a Yuuzhan Vong rarely seemed a factor.

The worldship, though, was starting to get on Harn's nerves. It represented not just all kinds of unknowable Vong nasties but possible threats from the Imperial and rogue Hapan elements, which meant *Wayward Soldier* and her crew stood to make a lot of enemies they couldn't afford to. Praelyx was usually as pragmatic as Harn, but for some reason he'd not only agreed to this job but decided he was going to go down to that worldship too.

Most of the time he barely thought of Praelyx as a Vong- the masquer and the attitude made him seem as un-Vong as one could get. Praelyx didn't seem to think of himself as very Vong either. But there he was, down on that worldship.

It made Harn wonder how well he knew his captain after all, and *that*, he decided, was the really unsettling part.

When the little Bimm pilot came to the bridge, it had been about an hour since they'd gotten the last comm transmission from the captured Imp shuttle. The furry creature was about one-tenth of Harn's total mass but nonetheless he strode across the command deck with confidence, right toward the first officer.

"Nothing to report, pilot," Harn grunted. He'd already commed the docked freighter *Mandala* to relay the message from the shuttle.

The Vjarna's right ear twitched. "I wanted a different view. Is that a problem?"

Wayward Soldier was never the most formal ship, the Harn didn't suppose there was any danger on letting the little Bimm do some pacing.

"Tell me," Vjarna said as he stepped beside the hulking Baragwin, "Did you try to stop your captain from going down there?"

Harn blinked his small eyes. "Why? Did you?"

Vjarna nodded. "She seemed... curiously intent."

Harn snorted. It was the closest he'd come to expressing disgruntled agreement, especially to a stranger.

He and Vjarna stood side-by-side, staring through the viewport for about a minute, when the Duro at the tactical station called, "Sir! Something just dropped out of hyperspace!"

Harn hurried over to the station as fast as he could, and Vjarna hurried after him. "What kind of something?"

"Looks like... Multiple targets..."

"What *kind*?" Harn said as he loomed over the tactical station.

"I see two corvettes, *Assassin*-class. One Corellian gunship... Sir, it looks like an old Imp escort carrier. It's already launching fighters."

Harn fought a curse. Escort carriers were basically mobile hangar bays capable of carrying a full wing of starfighters in the belly. It lacked in firepower but the other three ships certainly made up for that.

"They've moving to encircle us," the Duro explained, pointing to the tactical holo.

"I have eyes," Harn grumbled. "What kind of fighters from the carrier?"

"Looks like... Headhunters, Starchasers, uglies..."

"Has to be a mercenary fleet," piped Vjarna.

"Hell of a lot of mercs," muttered the Duro.

Harn lurched over to the comm station. "Send a call to the worldship, tell them we're under attack. And send the emergency signal the captain set up."

The comm officer nodded affirmative. Behind him the Duro asked, "Sir... Do we hold?"

Harn made an angry rumble in his throat. The merc fleet was already spreading out to stop any escape. Those fighters would be on him soon, but *Wayward Soldier* was a gunship designed to hold out against snubs. The best chance of survival was to either drop close to the worldship and hope Hapan help arrived, or run for an open space while the enemy was still deploying and leave Praelyx to die.

The latter option was the smart one. Harn knew that, but he hesitated, because if he left Praelyx behind here he'd never come back.

This wasn't like the Vong War and the Peace Brigade. His damned conscience would get to him if he ran and he knew it. He was getting soft in his old age.

"Turn us around," he said gruffly. "I want to see that fleet."

"But sir... do we *hold*?"

He was only able to agonize over that choice for a few seconds before the comm officer called, "Sir, we're being hailed!"

"All right," Harn said. "Let's see what they want. Helm, take us closer to the worldship."

Baragwin weren't famous conversationalists, but if he had to he could stall for time. The bent over the comm station and lowered his snout to the speaker grille. "This is Chazdrul Harn of the *Wayward Soldier*. State your intent."

"Chazdrul? Is that you?" The voice was vaguely familiar, probably human.

"I just gave you my name. Who is this?"

"This is Narl Lukhan, captain of the corvette *Edge Runner*. Been a long time. I had no idea you were running with Praelyx now."

Harn remembered Lukhan well from their days in the Peace Brigade. He'd been a loudmouth and a braggart but good for a fight and a night of drinking afterward.

Harn wasn't in the mood to reminisce. "Who hired you, Lukhan?"

"Doesn't matter, Chazdrul. All you need to do is shut down your weapons and let us pass. I promise no harm'll come to you."

The comm officer tugged Harn's sleeve and whispered, "They're jamming out signals, but we got the emergency call out fast."

"Did we signal to the shuttle?" Harn asked, just as quiet.

The human shook his head gravely.

"Well, Chazdrul?" Lukhan asked. "You've got a nice ship there. I'd hate to see you bust it up. By the way, where's Praelyx?"

"What do you want, Lukhan. Make it clear so we can come to some agreement."

"All right, then." The human sniffed with feigned offense. "I'll be clear and simple. You take your gunship and leave this system right now."

"And if we have people on the worldship?" It was as much as admitting Praelyx was down there, but Lukhan had probably figured that already.

"No can do, Chazdrul. You either go now or you don't go at all. I'm generous."

He was also trying to avoid a messy fight. There was no way *Wayward Soldier* could out-brawl another gunship, two well-armed corvettes, and a massive fighter wing. At most, they could take one capital ship with them before they got vaped. Some would call it a brave, heroic death but Harn had no intention of dying heroically, even if his conscience was making an unexpected comeback.

Lukhan wasn't looking to die either, heroically or otherwise, and Harn hoped that gave him a little more time. The Baragwin said, "I appreciate your generosity, but I've got to protect my people on the ground."

"I'm sure Praelyx has got to be touched by your loyalty. I know it's a hard choice, Chazdrul, but we both know what the smart way out of this is. If it's any consolation, I'll move fast once you're gone. Praelyx'll never know you ran on him."

Harn growled deep in his throat and looked at the tactical station, where the little Bimm from *Mandala* watched with fur bristling in panic. The Duro reported, "They've spread their fighter screen wide. Looks ready to intercept a run, not launch an attack."

The only option was to stall. Feeling strangely relieved, Harn said, "Lukhan, I've got to admit I'm curious. Where'd you pick up a fleet like that?"

The human chuckled. "Impressive, ain't it? The Imp carrier's a patched-up wreck but she still flies."

"I can see that. And they all work for you?"

"I've moved up in life."

"I can see that. Any chance you're taking on new employees?"

It was a transparent stall, but Lukhan was greedy and ambitious enough to look twice at the bait. *Wayward Soldier* was a better fighter than any individual ship in Lukhan's fleet; its addition would boost his offensive capabilities by almost fifty percent.

Lukhan's reply came as a crackling sigh. "You know, Chazdrul, I always thought Praelyx was better at wheeling and dealing than you."

"You've never seen me play sabacc. I can wheel and deal too."

"You're not a bad bluffer either. You know, I could just come and *take* that *Wayward Soldier* from you."

"It would cost you."

"I know. But it might be worth the trade. Plus I wouldn't have to split the payment any more than I already have."

Then the Duro called, "One more incoming! It's a big one!"

Harn dared to hope. He was about to ask what it was but froze. Against the starfield past the forward viewport he'd faintly been able to make out the thruster-glow of approaching starfighter and the brighter glow of the corvettes holding back.

He had no trouble at all seeing proud double-disc shape of the Hapan Battle Dragon that had just arrived.

The last time Tenel Ka had stood on the bridge of the *Dragon Queen* had been during the battle for Shedu Maad; the battle had ended in heartbreak and nearly gotten her and Allana killed. This time, though, they were not facing a super star destroy and its support ships but a miss-matched mercenary fleet of corvettes, gunships, and starfighters.

She would have felt very confident, if not for the spiral-armed disc of the Yuuzhan Vong worldship silhouetted against Myrkr's green glow dead ahead.

"Your Majesty, we're launching all Miy'tils now," Admiral Baas reported.

"And the pulse mass mines?"

"Deploying two."

Tenel Ka nodded. As the mercenary fleet struggled to reorient itself to the surprise arrival, the Hapans were wasting no time enacted their pre-arranged plan. The mercenaries had an impressive array of starfighters, more than *Dragon Queen* carried in its bays, but its small capital ships had no hope of outgunning the larger warship. Tenel Ka's primary goal was to force

them to surrender, both to spare bloodshed and to find out who had hired them.

She felt the command deck shift slightly as the its artificial gravity adjusted to the interdiction fields brought up by the two pulse mass mines. The trap was complete now; unless they destroyed both mines, the mercenaries had no way out of the Myrkr system.

"They have a jamming field set up," Admiral Baas said. "Still no hails."

Tenel Ka observed the tactical holo in the center of the bridge. It showed the mercenary ships swing around to face her and the starfighter screen reorient itself toward the Miy'tils racing forward. There was one last gunship, *Ranger*-class, hanging in position low over the worldship.

"Mark that vessel as friendly," Tenel Ka pointed to its light-speck.

"And the rest?" asked Baas.

Tenel Ka met the admiral's eye. "Hostile. You may fire when ready."

CHAPTER 27

Taryn Zel was starting to think they'd be marching in the dark forever, but in the end they found their way to an airlock sphincter that granted them access to deeper layers of the worldship where warm atmosphere still remaining.

That was good news in theory, but as soon as she took off her helmet Taryn found herself assaulted by the rank smell of decay. Her only consolation was the comically disgusted expressions that flashed on everyone else's faces too.

"Are we sure this air is safe?" asked Harkum.

"It's safe," the little blonde Jedi, Tahiri, said. "This is how the inside of the worldship is supposed to smell."

"Like a bantha's butt?"

"Exactly. It's part of the composting process that helps the worldships feed their plant life and generate more atmosphere."

"I thought this thing was supposed to be dead," said Muro.

"Not dead, dying. And it's been dying since before it reached this galaxy."

"How long do these worldships last for?"

Tahiri considered, and for some reason she looked at Praelyx. When he didn't respond she ventured, "I'd say

at least four, five hundred standard years. These really are *worldships*. It takes a long, long time to cross the void between galaxies.”

“Enough chat,” Taryn said as she hooked her bulbous helmet to the back of her belt and checked the charge on her blaster rifle. “Can you Jedi feel what’s ahead?”

Tahiri’s scarred forehead furrowed in thought, while Zekk just looked far-away. But then, he’d been looking that ever since their little chat in the ruined laboratory. It was almost like he was afraid of her. If non-Hapan men couldn’t handle directness from their women it was no wonder they wasted years fumbling around without getting the mates they wanted.

But then Zekk surprised her and said, “I do sense some presence. I can’t tell how many people but I bet they’re ahead not far ahead.”

Tahiri nodded. “He’s right. They can’t be far.”

Muro checked her heavy T-21 rifle. “We’d better get going, then.”

“I’m first.” Taryn shouldered her way to the front of the line. “Zekk, you’re with me. Use that Jedi radar to pick them up.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Veila, you’re right behind me. If we run into any Vonglife still down here-”

“I’ll handle it,” she nodded and gripped her light-saber.

“And the rest of us?” asked Harkum, apparently a little surly at being left out.

“Just be ready to fight,” Taryn said, and led them forward.

The low passage branched off several times, but at each junction Zekk and Tahiri paused, reached out with the Force, and directed them down the right course. Given her family, Taryn had never had the knee-jerk

suspicious of Jedi that most Hapans nurtured, but she'd never really realized how damned *useful* they could be. It was all the more reason to try and drag Zekk back to Hapes once all this was over. Even as a male, he could provide valuable services to the queen.

When they reached the fourth junction, somewhat was different. She could see it on both Jedi's faces. Zekk took his lightsaber in his hand for the first time and pointed down the corridor to the left. Tahiri nodded and tapped her forefinger against her lips, signaling silence.

The two Jedi crept forward; Taryn and Harkum fell in right behind them, with Praelyx and Muro taking the rear. There was another sphincter-like portal dead ahead, and the two Jedi took places on either side. Those behind them readied their weapons. Then Zekk slapped the center of the portal.

It opened like an iris. They suddenly had a view of a round chamber with a long nutrient stalk running like a pillar through the center. Taryn saw a trio of white-armored stormtroopers spin around toward the entrance, weapon raised. The Jedi immediately stepped through, lightsaber blazing, but before any battle could commence a voice called, "Halt!"

Taryn and Harkum shouldered past each other into the chamber. Taryn took in the complete scene with a sweep of the head: there were four stormtroopers in total, plus one Imperial officer still wearing his black vac suit.

Finally, wearing a different model, gray-colored suit, was a short, thin human male. He was past middle age by now, with only a little gray hair left on his balding head. His small eyes scanned the new arrivals and he said, surprisingly calm, "Who the devil are you people?"

“Are you Sinsor Khal?” asked Taryn. She resisted the urge to shift her rifle and point it at his chest; two stormtroopers already had their guns on her.

The old man nodded, as though it should have been obvious. “Like I asked, who are you?”

“We’re operatives for Queen Mother Tenel Ka Djo of the Hapes Consortium.”

“I know who Tenel Ka is.”

“We’re here to halt the construction of your bio-weapon,” said Zekk.

Khal blinked. “You know about that?”

“We know everything,” Praelyx spoke up. “Given the proper methods, Kosimo Westermal was very informative.”

That brought a wince from the Imperial captain. He asked, “What have you done with Moff Westermal?”

“He’s resting comfortably in my brig,” Praelyx said. “You’re welcome to join him. I’m not looking to kill today.”

“We will not surrender,” the Imp said, though for a second he’d looked hesitant. Taryn decided to take that for a good sign.

“There’s nothing you can do here,” she told them. “We’ve captured your shuttle. You have no escape.”

The Imp captain looked hesitant again; Khal, though, wore the same look of dull curiosity he’d had since they arrived.

“What’s the status of the bioweapon?” asked Praelyx. He began scouring the Vong biotech scattered around the room like he knew what he was looking for.

“Very near completion, actually,” the Imperial said darkly. “Your timing was impeccable.”

“Where’s the weapon?” asked Tahiri. “And where’s the qahsa you recorded the information on?”

Khal frowned. “How did you know I used a qahsa?”

"It's the only way to interface properly with the worldship. You probably had to manually copy over the data from the qahsa to one of your own computers to continue the work, right? It's probably why you've been here for a few days."

Khal's cheek twitched. "That rather covers it."

"What difference does it make?" Grunted Harkum. "Let's just take them out of here, then plant some charges and bring the whole thing down. Room, tunnels, everything."

"We need to identify the weapon to make sure we've destroyed it," said Muro.

"She's right," Tahiri's green eyes locked on Khal. "Where did you put it?"

Khal's face dropped in an uncomfortable frown. At first Taryn was simply confused; then she saw Zekk looking at Tahiri with a look of shock and mild horror. Apparently, the blond woman was doing some Jedi trick to force secrets from Khal's mind.

When his face twisted into a pained wince, Khal finally said, "All right, all right. I'll get you the strain I've developed." He looked at the Imperial captain. "Tell your men to stand down."

The officer waved a hand and the stormtroopers lowered their rifles without letting go. Tahiri and, for some reason, Praelyx followed Khal over to some console-like apparatus. The scientist's gloved fingers played over its surface until some seal popped open, dispelling a small burst of sealed gas.

Khal took out what looked like a fist-sized nut, with a hard smooth case. He held it up lovingly and told Tahiri, "You have no idea how difficult it was to resurrect the dying strains I found here. I wish I'd had to chance to test it."

"You're not going to get one," Praelyx said firmly.

Khal looked at Tahiri, and his eyes seemed to lock on her scars for the first time. "You seem to know a lot of shapers' technology. How did you become so familiar, Jedi?"

"I had a very crash course," she said as she reached out for the capsule.

Then Muro called from the back of the room, "Wait!"

Taryn turned halfway around and froze in shock. Captain Muro stood just two meters away, back to the open door, with her blaster rifle raised and aimed right at Taryn's face.

"Captain!" Tahri yelped. "What are you doing?"

"Retrieving Doctor Khal's data," she said simply. "As per my contract."

"Karking traitor!" Harkum snapped his rifle up, but before he could get off a shot two volleys of laser blasts from two separate stormtrooper rifles dropped him with a smoking hole in his chest.

After a nanosecond's shock, Zekk and Tahri ignited their lightsabers, but by then it was already too late. The Imperials had their weapons up; even the officer had produced a hold-out pistol and was pointing it right at Tahiri.

The Jedi, though, was looking right at Muro with obvious hurt in her eyes. She croaked, "Captain.... What is this?"

"I'm sorry," the older woman said stonily. "But with the money I'm being offered from this I can retire for good."

"They're trying to *exterminate* the Jedi!" Zekk almost shouted. "Do you really want genocide on your conscience?"

"Not my problem," Muro shook her head and kept her T-21 aimed right for Taryn's head.

"How do you think you can get past my ship?" asked Praelyx.

"I already called for help," Muro said. "Your gunship's getting overwhelmed right now."

Taryn did her best haughty scoff. "You think *we* didn't bring backup too?"

Uncertainty flashed over Muro's face, quickly stifled. She touched her her hip and for the first time Taryn saw the round cylinder of a timed charge clipped to her belt, its activation light blinking yellow.

"You have one minute," Muro said. "I'm not giving you any more. Doctor Khal, bring your sample over here."

"Gladly," the old scientist muttered. He stuffed the bioweapon capsule into his jumpsuit and grabbed his vac suit helmet on the way over to Muro's side. The stormtroopers formed up by the door too, their weapons raised and level the whole time. Part of Taryn wished the Jedi could spring to action and stop them, even if it cost her a faceful of rifle-shot.

Tahiri, still standing at the biotech console with her saber low at her side, croaked, "Was this your plan from the start?"

Muro's eyes darted to the Jedi and Taryn thought she saw a touch of guilt. "Not at first. I was contacted while you were on Euceron. They made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"Did they know about me? Is that why they contacted you?"

"That's right. I assume they had someone on Junction Station watching you."

"They?" asked Taryn. "Which *they*? Ducha Markessa?" She thought she was another guilty flicker on Muro's face but couldn't be sure. The woman clearly wasn't going to answer.

Tahiri asked, "What about Vjarna? Does he know?"

Muro looked like she was about to answer that one, but the Imperial captain interjected, "We don't have time for this. We need to go."

"Agreed," Muro said. "Doctor Khal, you first."

"Gladly," the scientist muttered and slipped through the door. Two stormtroopers followed. Muro and the officer backed to the door, but neither lowered their weapons.

"Time's almost up," Praelyx sneered. "Do what you're going to do, *Captain*."

Muro stopped in the middle of the doorway, reached down, and tapped the charge once. The light went off and Taryn allowed herself a tiny sigh of relief.

Muro spun fast and went up the tunnel. The Imp captain and his last two troopers backed slowly through the threshold, weapons raised at all times. If the Jedi were going to actually *do* something it was now or never.

But before they could move, the Imperial captain reached into his jumpsuit and pulled something out. A wicked grin flashed on his face right before he threw it in the air, spun, and ran.

"Grenade!" Praelyx shouted. "Down down *down*!"

Then the room exploded.

CHAPTER 28

When the flagship Battle Dragon of the Hapan Royal Navy dropped into realspace right above the Myrkr worldship, Chazdrul Harn had allowed himself the comforting belief that Lukhan's pirates would swiftly scatter and either flee or get wiped out by the superior Hapan force.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the route he'd hoped for.

The Hapans surprised him by deploying mass pulse mines, which promptly erected interdiction fields that prevented the mercenary fleet from jumping to hyperspace. He could only guess that was because the Hapans wanted to capture the mercenaries or force them to surrender; unfortunately for them, they were dealing with Narl Lukhan, one of the most exceptionally prideful and stubborn humans Harn had encountered on his many travels. Unfortunately for *Wayward Soldier*, Lukhan knew he couldn't fight a Battle Dragon head-on, so he decided instead to pull his ships back to the worldship and rely on his superior fighter wing to run interference against the Hapan Miy'tils, a job which, for the moment anyway, they were proving disturbingly competent at.

As a result, the *Wayward Soldier* found herself surrounded by two corvettes, a gunship, and an escort carrier, all hostile.

And the worst part was that Lukhan still kept that damned jamming field up, so there was no way to contact either Praelyx on the surface or the captain of that Hapan ship and ask them what the devil was doing on.

So, left to his own devices, Chazdrul Harn had to figure out what to do himself.

The Baragwin reacted quickly. They had nowhere to run and the best defense was offense. He ordered helm to charge the engines and race toward the escort carrier. Emptied of snubfighters, it was a very tempting target. Lukhan knew that, of course, and he countered by keeping his Corellian gunship close by. *Wayward Soldier* was a faster, stronger, newer model, but the DP20 was still formidable enough. Its laser turrets and missile launchers immediately tracked the *Soldier's* approach and opened fire.

The command deck shook as the shields absorbed the first volley. Harn commanded, "Swing us around the other side of the carrier. Use it as a shield."

Helm responded swiftly, pivoting *Soldier* so its starboard cannons had a full field of fire, first on the gunship, and then on the carrier. The boxy vessel still had defensive cannons that spewed more energy against *Soldier's* shields, but the gunship's target lock was temporarily blocked.

"Crack open that carrier," Harn ordered. "Leave 'em no place to roost."

"Gladly," growled the Trandosha gunner.

He looked to the Duro at the tactical station. "Give our friend a call. Tell him he's free to fly."

"Yes, sir."

The Corellian gunship was coming around to catch them but *Wayward Soldier* kept pace so that it could use the carrier for continual cover, even as it began to

pound the ship's shields with missiles and laserfire. By Harn's bet those shields wouldn't last long; the question was whether Lukhan's two corvettes could catch up to them before he could break either capital ship.

"We could really use some fighter cover right now," he heard the Duro mutter.

"The Hapans are still tangled up," Harn grunted, once more wishing he could comm that battle dragon. "So we use what we can."

The Duro glanced at his console. "*Mandala's* away."

"Good. Helm, slow down. Give that gunship a tempting shot. Rear shields to maximum."

He glanced at the tactical display as the gunship swung around on their aft and opened fire. Just as it died so, Revli Vjarna's little Corellian freighter arced over the carrier's back and swung down on the gunship, emptying every missile in its tubes. They cut through the gunship's rear shields and tore apart one engine cluster. *Soldier* pivoted so its entire starboard side could unleash hell on the gunship's forward compartment. They broke through the shields easily, vaporizing the bridge and sending shrapnel tumbling through space. Cheers rippled across *Soldier's* bridge but Harn called, "Kill the carrier! Kill it! Kill it!"

The gunship emptied its own missile payloads into the carrier's aft. Its shields crumpled and the engines burst. Lights inside began to die and the carrier started to drift, helplessly pulled in by the worldship's gravity.

"Boss!" the comm officer called, "Jamming's down!"

"Good. We must have killed the source." Harn lurched over to the communications station. "Hail the Hapans. Time to put together a *real* battle plan."

The officer's face immediately fell. "Getting hailed by *Edge Runner*."

Harn considered ignoring it, but the old mercenary just might want to surrender. "All right, put him on."

The human's voice immediately came over the speaker. "Damn you, Chazdrul. Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

The comm officer smirked in amusement but Harn said, "Does this have a point, Lukhan?"

"Enjoy your little victory while it lasts, you ugly karker."

The comm line abruptly shut off. Harn immediately looked to the tactical station. "What's happening?"

"Both corvettes, coming right for us," the Duro said. "And he's pulling back some of his fighters."

It was what Harn had expected. "Helm, get us to that Battle Dragon as fast as you can. And comm, *now* get me the Hapans."

The holo-image that materialized on *Dragon Queen's* bridge wasn't what Tenel Ka had been expecting. The sloop-shouldered, thick-necked, small-eyed Baragwin face seemed very alien, and she saw Admiral Baas restrain a shudder.

"Is this the captain of the *Wayward Soldier*?" Baas asked with all her Hapan prissiness.

The Baragwin's head swung back and forth. "First officer, Chazdrul Harn. Captain Praelyx is on the worldship with your agents and the Jedi."

"Jedi?" Tenel Ka interjected. "Which Jedi?"

"Two of 'em, humans. Little blond girl with scars on her head and a big tall guy with black hair. Calls himself Zekk."

Tenel Ka's jaw dropped. Jaina had mentioned that she'd passed news of the Yuuzhan Vong bioweapon on to Tahiri, so it wasn't a total surprise that Jacen's apprentice had found her way here. She'd halfway

suspected it was her when Trista had mentioned a Jedi working with their clients.

But Zekk was different. She'd resigned herself over the past few weeks to his death in the Transitory Mists, one more casualty of that awful battle.

But he'd ended up here, just like Tahiri, just like Tenel Ka. A shudder ran through her as she wondered whether the Force itself hadn't drawn them all back to this place where everything had changed, where they'd lost things they couldn't imagine, where they'd made promises they could never keep.

"Are they all right?" she asked the Baragwin.

"Last I heard. Their ship went down after a dust-up with the Imps but they found themselves another. We're trying to hail them now. Listen, Lady—"

"You're addressing the Queen of the Hapes Consortium" Baas snapped.

"Okay, okay," Harn waved a clawed hand. "But if you haven't noticed, we're heading your way with two corvettes on our butts and a lot of fighters messing with us. We need some help."

"You'll have it," Tenel Ka promised.

The Baragwin nodded and promptly killed the signal. Tenel Ka turned on Admiral Baas and said, "Do everything you can to keep that ship alive. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

"Good. And prepare a shuttle. I may have to go down to that worldship."

"*You?* Majesty, I must protest—"

Before she could finish, *Dragon Queen's* captain called, "Madams, you need to see this!"

She was pointing not to the tactical holo but out the viewport. At first Tenel Ka just saw flashes of night against the backdrop of Myrkr and the worldship. Then

she spotted the round body of the crippled escort carrier as it slammed into the drifting gunship. Both vessels scraped and sparked against each other without exploding, and both seemed to be falling away, pulled in by gravity's reel.

"Will those ships impact on the worldship?" asked Tenel Ka.

The captain nodded. "Within five minutes, Your Majesty."

"The odds of them hitting the same place as our agents is tiny," Admiral Baas said.

"That's true," the captain nodded, "But we've been running projections. The worldship already has a decaying orbit around Myrkr. The impact of those ships will nudge it even further into the planet's gravity well. Our first readout said it would take another decade for the worldship to fall into the planet."

"But now?" asked Tenel Ka, dread rising.

The captain swallowed. "It has only a few hours left, Majesty."

CHAPTER 29

When the grenade went-off, instinct took over. There was no room for hesitation or doubt, not even the sting of betray and the burn of anger. There was only the need to survive.

Tahiri and Zekk worked as one, throwing themselves into the Force and using its power to erect an invisible shield over their heads. As Praelyx and Taryn fell to the floor and covered heads with their hands, the two Jedi blocked the concussive force of the explosion, reflecting it upward, trapping it in the narrow shape between their Force-created umbrella and the chamber's yorik coral ceiling.

Their umbrella held. The ceiling didn't.

The entire chamber came crumbled on their heads. Zekk and Tahiri's shield could reflect rock, and concussive burst of pressure in the oxygen, but it couldn't hold back the crust of a Yuuzhan Vong worldship. Their connection, clear in its desperation, allowed them to think as one. Tahiri swooped and grabbed Praelyx by the arm; Zekk grabbed Taryn by the waist and hauled her upright. The four of them half-ran, half-fell toward the corridor as the chamber itself came collapsing around them. A chunk of yorik coral slammed into Praelyx's back, dropping him to his

knees. Tahiri held on and tugged him forward, even as another large coral chink her on the shoulder and almost spun her around. Zekk and Taryn were already out through the portal; Tahiri found her own last burst of strength and dragged the Yuuzhan Vong captain through the gap.

The chamber behind them caved in fast, but the old yorik coral around the tunnel was also starting to splinter. Tahiri finally let go of Praelyx so he could stand, and the four of them raced as fast as they could through the tunnels. Tahiri's mind was too addled to remember the way back to the shaper lab but Zekk apparently knew it all; he made each turn without hesitation and she followed him the whole way out.

By the time they locked the helmets of their vac suits on and finally exited into the shapers' lab the world-ship had stopped rumbling around them. Tahiri would have felt better about that, but when she reached out with the Force she could sense a cluster of alarmed minds just over the rim of the laboratory crater.

Heading right for the assault shuttle.

Desperation dissolved into something else. Tahiri found the hurt and anger inside her, not just at Muro- a woman she'd respected and even *liked*- for her betrayal, but at everything else too. At the Hapan and Imperial schemers, at the monster Jacen had become, at the future she'd never have with Anakin, at everything the Yuuzhan Vong had done to her.

At herself, most of all.

She found everything she needed inside her and she drew strength from it. She threw herself upward, over the rim of the crater, and bounded across the plain as fast as she could. Her lightsaber blazed in her hand and Zekk shouted in her ear, telling her to wait up.

She killed the comm line and kept running.

She could see the shuttle resting atop the low crest of a ridge. She saw the cluster of beings around it, the stormtroopers and people in vac suits, pull open the hatch and climb aboard.

She knew she would never get there in time. Her blaster was useless against the shuttle's armored hull and she could never fling her lightsaber far enough, or wield it with enough precision through the Force.

They'd rise up any moment now and fly toward the stars, Muro and Khal and the rest, and they'd finish the Yuuzhan Vong bioweapon and then they'd use it against Tenel Ka or maybe against the whole Jedi Order, making even worse a massacre than Darth Caedus had hoped for.

Tahiri stopped in her tracks, panting, and reached out with the Force. She found the minds in the ship: Khal cool and analytical even now, the Imperial captain frantic for his own survival. She felt the stormtroopers crammed nervously in the back of the cockpit, kicking aside the corpses of their fellow soldiers and two Rodian mercenaries.

And she found Captain Muro, seated (so Tahiri felt) in the pilot's chair, giving the shuttle last pre-flight checks before taking off. And she felt Muro's relief when the repulsorlifts churned to life and the shuttle began to rise above the barren plain.

Tahiri closed her eyes, concentrated, and found the explosive charge still clipped to Muro's belt. She'd gotten a good look at it in the cavern and recognized its familiar model. She closed her eyes, ignoring the shuttle as it took off. Her fingers twitched at her sides; in her mind, in the Force, they were running along the surface of Muro's explosive, finding the right buttons.

With the Force, she found the dead-man trigger and pushed it, held it down.

Then she opened her eyes.

For what seemed like forever she stood alone on the plain, watching the receding engine-flare of the shuttle as it pulled up though the great chasm of the world-ship's broken hull for the stars and wondering if she'd really been reaching out with the Force at all, or just conjuring illusions in her mind.

Then the shuttle burst like a star. Its flare lasted for only a few beautiful seconds before debris began to fall, slowly, toward the plain.

A brittle, satisfied smile settled on Tahiri's lips. She felt the anger smolder and fade until it was just a warm thing in her center, giving her comfort and strength.

Then she felt Praelyx slap her on the shoulder and heard Taryn say, "Fine work, Jedi. Fine work," with a look of surprised respect.

Then Tahiri looked at Zekk and saw the quiet disappointment in eyes. From the Force, she felt nothing; he'd closed himself off from her once more. As much as she wanted to rebuke him, to join Taryn and Praelyx in issuing congratulations to herself, she knew Zekk was right and they were wrong.

She'd failed again.

CHAPTER 30

The remainder of the fight over Myrkr seemed to provide Chazdrul Harn with an excellent reminder that his former Peace Brigade alumnus Narl Lukhan might have been an impulse hot-headed braggart, but he hadn't stayed alive by being stupid.

Wayward Soldier had found itself battered from all sides by the starfighters chasing after it, but the gunship had enough of a head start over Lukhan's two Assassin corvettes that he'd been able to outrace them to the protective range of *Dragon Queen's* turbolaser cannons. Hapan warships had heavy batteries more fitted for combat between capital ships than battling starfighters or even quick little corvettes, but one or two lucky shots would be enough to punch through either ship's shields, and now that the fight had come closer to home, the Miy'tils were attacking with a new-found bravado.

"What's happening now?" asked a familiar, slightly frantic voice.

Harn looked down to see the little Bimm freighter pilot, Vjarna, come up beside him.

"Is your ship secure?" he asked.

The Bimm nodded. The flight to *Dragon Queen* had battered his freighter badly, and *Mandala* had barely

managed to couple with *Wayward Soldier* before forcing its engines into an emergency shut-down.

"I should warn you," said Harn, "We picked up some explosion inside the worldship a few minutes ago, probably big enough to be a ship detonating."

Vjarna's long ears drooped. "Do you have any idea whose it was?"

"No. We can't get close enough to scan and we can't make comm contact with anyone on the worldship." He paused, then added, "It's too early to worry. We have to keep ourselves alive."

Vjarna clearly wasn't one to mope. The little Bimm nodded and looked at the tactical display, which showed the two corvettes flying wild loops in and out of *Dragon Queen's* firing range. "What's he doing?"

"Keeping those Miy'tils busy," Harn grunted. "And harassing those Hapans."

"Do you think he's stalling for reinforcements?"

"I hope not. Even if he does, they'll get pulled from hyperspace well-clear of the planet thanks to those pulse mass mines."

He froze and looked back at the holo. Lukhan's starfighters, now without a carrier to roost in, were buzzing around like flitgnats, as angrily and endlessly as the corvettes themselves, but as he stared at the holo he realized there was some pattern to their frenzy. As they bobbed and weaved and whirled cartwheels through space they kept edging close to two particular points in space, too regularly for it to be simple chance-

He lurched for the comm station. "Get me the Hapans!"

"Right away, Boss."

Even as the holo of that stern woman admiral flickered to life, the bridge shuddered slightly as one of

the pulse mass mines exploded and its gravity well collapsed.

"I was just about to tell you they're making a break for it," Harn said.

The admiral nodded curtly. "We're moving to cover the mines now. Can your ship run interference for us?"

"We already took one beat-ing."

"If that mercenary escapes--"

"You people hired us to vape your bioweapon or whatever, not hunt down who's responsible."

The woman gave a haughty sneer. "Listen here, First Officer Harn--"

The Baragwin held up a claw. "Get closer and we'll provide some cover, but we're not getting ourselves blown up over your fight. Sorry, admiral, but we're in it for the money."

The admiral looked like she was about to give retort, then paused, like she was listening to something. Then she said, very icily, "Follow our shadow. We go in together you closer."

"Yes, ma'am." Harn gave a mock salute, and the holo winked off.

Admiral Baas turned away from the holo-projector with the look of ill-concealed frustration mixed with disdain Hapans so often put up when dealing with outsiders, especially aliens and males. In other circumstances, Tenel Ka would have found it almost comical.

Right now, she just worried.

"The Miy'tils are moving ahead," Baas said as she looked at the tactical holo, "But the corvettes are already firing on the pulse mass mine. I don't think we'll be able to take them."

"Some of the starfighters may not be hyperspace-capable," Tenel Ka said.

“True, bit I doubt the snubfighter pilots know who hired them. We need confirmation of Ducha Markessa’s complicity, and for that we need their leaders.”

“Fact,” Tenel Ka nodded grimly. As concerning as that was, she was more worried by the two wrecked capital ships that were tumbling toward the worldship. The craft were less than a minute from impact, and once they hit, there would only be limited time to recover their people on the surface. She wanted to think they were alive, that she’d feel the deaths of the Zel sisters, Zekk, even Tahiri, but there was no way to know for certain.

The deck shifted with the death of the second interdiction field, and she heard Admiral Baas bite back profanity.

“There’s nothing we can do now, Admiral,” she said as the two corvettes streaked madly away from the planet. The Miy’tils gave chase but the mercenary starfighters scrambled every which-way. She couldn’t see them jump to hyperspace, not with her bare eyes, but the fatal winking-out of both corvettes was unmistakable.

Baas, to her credit, took the loss with crisp aplomb. She called, “Tell the hangar to prepare one shuttle for launch to the worldship. Assemble a recovery team with weapons and vac suits. Tell them to be prepared for anything.”

“Tell them their queen will be going with them,” Tenel Ka added.

That raised the eyes of everyone on the bridge. Before Baas could object she fixed the admiral with her best regal glare and said, “Their communication systems may be down, their people scattered. I will be of unique service in locating them.”

Baas knew well enough when not to argue with her queen. Voice stiff with obvious disapproval she said, “Very well, Your Majesty. It will be done.”

Tenel Ka should have felt better about that, but when she looked out the viewport she saw the brief flash of the mercenary ships slamming into the worldship. It seemed like just a small spark against the massive dead form, and she didn’t see any apparent nudge in its orbit, but she trusted her people’s projections.

“Assemble the team at once,” Tenel Ka said. “We haven’t much time.”

CHAPTER 31

Taryn Zel didn't know why the Jedi looked so glum as they marched across the empty plain, back toward *Red Kiss*' crash site. Yes, they'd lost people- Praelyx's people- on this mission, and Muro's betrayal had been an unfortunate surprise, but in the end they'd accomplished exactly what they wanted to: the destruction of the bioweapon and the elimination of Sinsor Khal and all his nasty knowledge. True, Taryn would have preferred to take them captive so they could confirm Ducha Markessa's hand behind all this, but there were other ways to prove her complicity. The main threat had been eliminated.

The sight of *Red Kiss* halfway smashed into the ground dimmed her spirits. The freighter had served her and her sister well on many missions, and one look told her it wouldn't be spaceworthy again, not unless someone dragged it out of the dust with a heavy tractor beam. She looked overhead, through the chasm of the worldship's split-open exterior and decided that was unlikely.

"Captain Praelyx," she said, interrupting the awkward silence that had fallen over the group comm channel.

"Yes?"

"Do you suppose *Wayward Soldier* could slip through that crack and drag us out?"

"I'm not sure," the captain grunted. "It may have to. I just hope your sister got the comm system working in that wreck so we can call Harn."

"Maybe that other freighter can help," piped Neevo. The sole surviving Rodian had, lucky for him, been tossed out of the shuttle by the Imperials when they reclaimed it.

"I'm not sure about that," Tahiri said softly. The woman had clearly been shaken by Muro's betrayal.

"That may be our best option," said Zekk. "We can... tell the co-pilot about what happened later."

"Assuming he wasn't in on it," Praelyx shook his head. "Good help is hard to find, Jedi."

Once they got close enough to *Red Kiss*, Taryn turned on her comm and called, "Oh sister, dear, you're still there aren't you?"

After a short second, Trista replied, "Good to see you're back. Report."

"Target neutralized. Weapon destroyed. It's a victory."

"You don't sound victorious."

"Tell me what your repair work accomplished."

Trista sighed deeply and said, "You'd better all come aboard."

The five of them climbed through the airlock, and to Taryn's surprise, her sister and two mercenary techs had found a way to seal whatever hull breach had caused the atmosphere leak.

"We can't bring up the climate control systems or air recyclers," Trista warned as they took off their helmets. "So this is all the air we've got."

"Cold too," Taryn said. She could feel it prickling her face.

“With all of you back we’ll use up the air real fast,” the Snivvian merc added.

“Good to see you too, Gorlum,” Praelyx said, then looked at Trista. “What about comm systems? Can we call *Wayward Soldier*?”

There was a long pause, and Trista’s heart sank. Her sister said, “No. The transmission dish got shot clean off during the missile attacks.”

“What about the sensor array?” Praelyx pressed. “Can we at least see what’s going on up there?”

“We heard they called for reinforcements,” added Tahiri.

Trista nodded grimly. “We could only pick up a little. It looked like some kid of a fight, but we can’t be sure.”

“We need to find some way to let my people know we’re down here,” Praelyx said.

“Assuming they haven’t been blown up,” added Neevo.

Praelyx turned on him. “No. I trust Harn. He can handle himself. Let’s have a look at those sensors.”

The group crowded into the cockpit, where Praelyx bent over the console and scoured the few systems that still worked. The determination on his face wilted into disappointment, then tightened again in curiosity.

“What is it?” Taryn shouldered next to him. “What do you see?”

“Look at the telemetry data.” He tapped the console. “The planet. It’s getting closer.”

“Getting closer?” the Snivvian, Gorlum, said from the back. “How is it getting closer?”

“It’s not coming to us,” Praelyx said. “We’re coming to it.”

“Does that man this thing’s orbit is decaying?” asked Neevo.

“It certainly seems that way. Something in the battle could have knocked its orbit into a steeper decay.”

“Like what? Like *Wayward*—”

“No.” Praelyx held up a finger. “We need to signal them, let them know we need pickup.”

“But how?” Gorlum whined. “I don’t want to die on this rock!”

Praelyx looked to Taryn, then Trista, and for once Taryn felt a flush of shame. She had no idea how to contact the ships in orbit- assuming there was anyone friendly to contact at all.

Then Zekk and Tahiri sucked in breaths at once. Tahiri looked tense still, but a smile softened Zekk’s features. Taryn hadn’t seen many of those, and it suited him.

“We’re gonna make it,” he said. “Help’s on the way.”

CHAPTER 32

Tenel Ka felt it, a surge of confidence in the Force like a half-remembered touch. She whispered Zekk's name so softly no one else heard it, not even the shuttle's pilot and co-pilot that were crammed into the cockpit with her.

"Your Majesty," the co-pilot said as they fell toward the crevasse that split the worldship's crust apart like an egg shell, "We're beginning our scan. No transmission signals detected. Searching for metallic compounds."

"The worldship is beginning to rotate faster," the pilot reported. "Shifting velocity to match."

Tenel Ka, strapped to the seat behind the pilot, leaned forward to get a better view. The shuttle slipped beneath the crack like it was falling into a deep canyon. Below, its searchlights stroked a vast dusty plain. At first it seemed totally featureless; then she spotted something that looked like a valley, bottoming out into a dried riverbed.

"Getting something ahead," the pilot reported. "Dropping altitude."

Next they passed over another plain. She reached out with the Force and found Zekk's presence still there, warm and confident. She knew Tahiri less well, but she

believed the other Jedi was present too. Both of them still felt distant, their locations were impossible to tell. She kept her eyes on the plain below, and her breath caught in her chest as the searchlights flashed over a worn, angular metal structure.

"It's... an Imperial walker," the pilot said with restrained surprise.

Tenel Ka's mouth went dry. "Fact. Keep moving forward."

They soared past the crumpled walker's body and flew low over the plain. She remembered that metal contraption from all those years ago; her friend Lowbacca had nearly been killed in it, along with the Rodian Jovan Drark, with whom Tenel Ka had worked previous scouting missions. That had been early in the strike team's mission; Anakin had still been alive, as had Drark, neither for much longer.

And Jacen had still been Jacen, wrapped up in his own worries about the Force while simultaneously worrying about his tense, tangled relationship with his strong-willed little brother, a relationship that was painfully close to an ending neither of them expected or wanted.

Tenel Ka felt Zekk nudge her in the Force; something of her distress had rippled across to him, and she tried to reassure him she was all right. In truth, just knowing he was there to feel her, that he was alive at all, was enough to make her feel stronger. She'd lost so much already, getting Zekk back felt like a precious gift.

"Getting another signal," the co-pilot said. "This one looks scattered. It might be debris from the explosion we observed earlier."

The spotlight swept the dusty plain again and picked up scattered fragments of black, twisted metal. "So it is," Tenel Ka said. "Keep going."

“Forward, Your Majesty?”

“Forward.”

The pilot nodded and kicked the engines ahead. Like most Hapans they were uncomfortable with Jedi; Tenel Ka usually resisted displaying her powers before her people, but in this instance Zekk’s life took precedence.

As they continued ahead the searchlight stopped over a large crater that seemed to be pocked with smaller ones.

“Slow down,” Tenel Ka commander.

The co-pilot frowned. “I don’t sense any metals here, Your Majesty. No heat signatures either.”

Tenel Ka strained against her crash webbing to look down at the crater. The space had been laid barren by the vacuum, by time, by the fight that had occurred here, and for a moment Tenel Ka doubted her initial assumption, but in the end, there could be no doubt. She was looking at the shaper laboratory where Anakin Solo had died, where everything had changed.

Where her promise to protect Jacen from the dark side had been irrevocably broken, even before she’d made it.

“Your Majesty?” the pilot gently prodded. “There appears to be nothing here.”

“Fact.” Nothing but ghosts. “Resume course.”

She settled back in her seat. She wondered how harrowing this return must have been for Zekk, or worse, Tahiri, who’d never truly recovered from her loss here.

Not that any of them really had, or ever would.

She felt another nudge; Zekk again. She allowed familiar warmth to flood through her and told the pilots, “We are drawing close. Be ready to make a descent.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the co-pilot said as she kept her eyes on her sensors. Tenel Ka felt a spike of alarm

through her in the Force right before she said, "We're getting another metallic signature. There seems to be residual heat as well."

"Take us there," Tenel Ka ordered, not that she needed to. She unbuckled her crash webbing and stood up, one arm braced against the co-pilot's seat as she watched the wrecked form of the *Red Kiss* gleam under the searchlight. One look told Tenel Ka that her cousins wouldn't be getting that ship spaceworthy, not in the time they had left.

"Trying to hail them" the co-pilot said. "No response."

Tenel Ka didn't need one. She felt Zekk's relief through the Force, and Tahiri's too. "Set down on the plain next to the freighter. They'll join us shortly."

"Landing gear extended," the pilot reported. "Setting down."

Tenel Ka leaned back, made sure her pilots couldn't see her, and allowed herself a smile. *This* mission to Myrkr, at least, would not end in tragedy. Her promise to herself would not end like the others.

That was when the worldship buckled, trembled, and shattered.

From space, hovering underneath *Dragon Queen's* bottom disc, the crew of *Wayward Soldier* could see the Yuuzhan Vong worldship's great hull begin to crack under the strain of Myrkr's gravity. First one of the great vessel's spiral arms seemed to twist and snap under an invisible grip; then the existing crack that cut from the disc's edge to its center began to widen.

Chazdrul Harn had been hoping that the worldship was internally stable enough to remain whole for most of its fall. That might mean a nasty impact on Myrkr, but at least it would stay intact long enough for the

Hapans to make a proper retrieval. Now it looked like the damn thing might crumble and start burning up in the atmosphere.

"Captain Muro," the little Bimm beside him gasped. "I have to get to her. If I can get *Mandala* to—"

"That freighter won't fly and we both know it," Harn scowled as he shuffled over to the comm station and turned it on. "*Dragon Queen*, this is *Wayward Soldier*. Respond."

The Hapan admiral's stern visage sprung to life before him. "What is it, Captain?"

"What's the status of your retrieval?"

"Still in progress," the woman said stiffly.

"Admiral, is there anything—"

"No. We will update you when we learn more."

At that, the holo winked off. Harn and Vjarna shared hopeless looks; then both turned their eyes on the worldship as it continued to crumble.

The great plain cracked beneath the Hapan shuttle just as it lowered its landing gear; slabs of raw yorik coral, twice the size of the ship, suddenly burst through the dust covering the plain. The ground beneath *Red Kiss* suddenly jugged and the broken freighter began sliding back. By the time it started moving, most of its passengers had already spilled out onto the plain in hope of retrieval. Zekk and Taryn stayed at the back, and when the shuttle bucked and started sliding, the Hapan was thrown back into the Jedi and both went tumbling hard into the airlock vestibule. The ship continued to rattle around them as they struggled to untangle from each other's limbs.

A voice squawked over his vac suit's comm line, so tense in its panic he barely recognized it as Trista said, "Sister! Sister! Please respond!"

"Coming out now," Taryn grunted. The ship kept jerking and heaving around them, but she crawled on hands on knees over to the edge of the airlock portal. Zekk tried to rise but immediately fell forward, half-landing on top of her.

"Save it for later, Jedi," Taryn squirmed out from beneath him.

Before Zekk could bleat out a rejoinder the ship jumped again. Dust flew into the airlock, blinding them and drumming on their helmets, but he could feel his stomach lurch as the ship was thrown up once more.

He hung onto Taryn's waist with one arm and battered the dust away with the other. When it cleared, his guts turned to ice.

Red Kiss, or what was left of it, had been bucked free of the shattered field of yorik coral. The worldship's limited gravity hadn't been enough to keep it on the ground and now it was being flung outward, spinning as it moved.

The broken ground flashed by, then the worldship's exterior shell and the wide crack that seemed to be growing wider. Then he saw the stars, and then the engine-flares and smooth gleaming metal of Tenel Ka's shuttle as it tried to catch up with them.

Then they kept spinning, and the same scenes whipped by again. He didn't know if they'd fly through the gap or smash unto the coral ceiling; either way he wanted to get aboard Tenel Ka's ship as soon as possible. The next time it flashed by, he saw the ship pulling close, its landing ramp extended and a few figures in vac suits hanging off; they were either climbing aboard or trying to catch him, he couldn't tell.

He tried to calm himself, to find the Force and the people he cared about in it. He felt Tenel Ka on that ship, uncharacteristically panicked, and he felt Tahiri.

He vaguely recognized the Force-impression of the Hapan woman lying beneath him.

We're coming over! He tried to tell his fellow Jedi. Whether they understood or not didn't matter. As *Red Kiss* flipped around yet again he tapped his helmet against Taryn's and said, "Get ready!"

"We can't jump," she said. "They're too far away!"

"Just trust me!" he shouted and rolled off her, pulling his arm from her waist.

The shuttle flipped into view again, and he was ready. He grabbed Taryn with the Force and *flung* her out the airlock, sent her rolling head-over-feet toward the shuttle as it struggled to keep pace with the tumbling freighter.

All of that flipped out of view. He saw a brief flash of stars, and the rough looming roof of yorik coral rushing to meet him. He tried to keep track of Taryn in the Force, keep moving her, but he found his efforts met by another's. Inside his mind Tahiri said, *We have her!*

Zekk felt relief flood through him. Then there was an awful scraping, and he was thrown upward, hard against the rim of the airlock. He heard the sound of his helmet cracking; then he heard, felt, and saw nothing at all.

Tenel Ka, one hand hooked on the landing strut as she leaned halfway out of the shuttle's cargo hold, stared in wordless terror as the freighter's battered disc hit the inside of the worldship's protective shell. Its starboard edge- *not* the edge with the airlock from which Taryn had just flown, Force-assisted, into Tahiri and Trista's grip, not the one where Zekk was trapped-collided with the yorik coral and ground into it; the freighter's flipping stopped but instead its hull began to

shear off in pieces along with chunks of dislodged coral. One slab fell right against the shuttle, barely missing the extended landing ramp and nicking its hull.

"Your Majesty!" the pilot's voice rang in the ear of her vac suit. "Do we have them?"

"Not yet!" she ordered, not caring how panicked she sounded. They kept chasing *Red Kiss*, even as its torn-up belly finally swung upward and slammed fully into the coral ceiling.

"Get us closer!" she called to the pilot. "Closer!"

The pilot, to her credit, didn't protest or complain. She kicked in a little additional altitude, skimming the coral underside so close she risked scraping off their own hull.

Tahiri tugged the pinned-up sleeve Tenel Ka's missing arm. "Can you find Zekk? I can't feel him!"

Tenel Ka had felt a fast burst of panic and a faster winking-out. She stared at the freighter as it scraped along, knowing it would only be a few seconds before the entire thing tore apart in a mess of shrapnel and debris from which there could be no survival.

Not again. She'd lost so much on this damned worldship already; not just Anakin and other good Jedi but all the things she could never quantify: youth, hope, possibility, love.

She wouldn't lose any more. She couldn't. She'd sworn to herself she wouldn't let this place anyone more from her. She couldn't live with herself if she broke one more promise.

Desperation gave her fuel. She reached out with the Force and found the faint echo of Zekk's presence, a presence she'd known deep inside for almost half her life. The echo was enough. She found him and pulled.

She sensed Tahiri join strength with her. She saw a dark figure tumble from *Red Kiss* moments before the

entire ship tore itself apart. The two of them pulled his body from the expanding debris cloud, reeling it toward the extended landing ramp.

It was Taryn who stretched forward and grabbed Zekk's arm as it dangled limp to one side. She pulled him in with both hands and Tahiri grabbed him too, reeling him in.

Tenel Ka staggered with them up the ramp and shouted in her comlink, "Go now! Take us out!"

The pilot must have been too happy to reply, because the shuttle immediately banked down, putting itself well clear of the shuddering yorik coral ceiling, then banked to the other side and accelerated. Once they'd dragged Zekk into the hold, Tahiri slapped the control panel on the wall and retracted the ramp.

Tenel Ka and Taryn both stayed with Zekk. His helmet had been cracked; his face was slack and unconscious but it didn't look like he'd suffered severe decompression.

Once the ramp sealed, fresh air hissed into the chamber. Tenel Ka unlatched her helmet but Taryn got hers off first. She tossed it into the corner and immediately tugged Zekk's off too. She brushed his hair away and ran her hands over his face, warm palms against cool cheeks.

"I can feel him," said Tahiri as she dropped to her knees beside him. "He's really faint, though."

Taryn pulled his bare head up into her lap and felt for a pulse. "He's still beating."

"We'll get a medic down immediately," Tenel Ka said.

Taryn bent over and, to the surprise of both other women, planted a kiss firm on Zekk's mouth. When she pulled back his cold lips twitched, but his eyes didn't open.

"Next time I'll make sure you remember it, Jedi," Taryn muttered, then looked up. "I'll stay with him, Go up. Go!"

Tahiri scrambled to her feet. Tenel Ka was right behind her. The two women hurried through crammed hallways, shouting for someone to go see Zekk in the hold, until they reached the cockpit, where they were greeted with the sight of crumbling coral falling toward them.

"Hold on!" a voice cried, and Tenel Ka realized that Trista had taken the shuttle's controls. Apparently not one to mourn the loss of her prized freighter, the woman wrested with the yoke and nimbly avoided one chunk of coral, then another.

One more big one tumbled at them. Trista swung the yoke so hard to the right her whole body almost fell out of her chair, and inertia shoved Tahiri into Tenel Ka and Tenel Ka into the jumpsuited form of what must have been the mercenary captain from *Wayward Soldier*.

"We're clear!" Trista whooped as the last bits of the crumbling worldship disappeared. Stars filled their vision, and in the distance, the double-disc shape of the Hapan warship. *Dragon Queen* had never once looked so spectacular, Tenel Ka decided.

Tenel Ka would have been happy to soar right to her ship, but Tahiri leaned over Trista's shoulder and said, "Turn us around."

The pilot frowned and looked to Tenel Ka. Tahiri added, "Kill acceleration, then reorient us toward Myrkr. Please. I want to see."

Tenel Ka understood. She nodded, and Trista cut their speed and spun the shuttle around so their view-port faced the planet and the burning pyre of the dying worldship.

The spiral arms of the great creation's disc had been torn apart, falling into the atmosphere and burning up. A corona of fire spread around the craft's splitting center as it hit Myrkr's atmosphere. As she watched, the great rift within it spread even larger until the entire worldship cracked in two. Its coral entrails spilled out, so much immediately igniting as it tumbled toward the planet so as to form a giant umbrella of fire that seemed to reach out and grasp the rest of the disc.

She remembered the first time she'd seen that worldship; who had been with her, and who she'd lost in the long years since. Yet in all that time, in all that had happened, this place had remained in the back of her mind as surely as it had hung dead over Myrkr in its slow-decaying orbit.

As she watched the worldship's death a stunning sense of freedom came over her. It made her dizzy, and stole away her words, even her thoughts. Nothing could truly encapsulate what she was seeing, what she felt.

"Hmmp," the mercenary captain said, "Good riddance."

Tenel Ka looked at him and saw the satisfaction on his face, but when she tried to find him in the Force she found nothing, nothing at all.

Tahiri must have realized that. She put a hand on Tenel Ka's shoulder and said, "I'll explain later."

Tenel Ka nodded. The other woman didn't take her hand away. They stood together in the back of the cockpit, watching the worldship dissolve. Her mind fell back to Jacen's funeral; it seemed like forever ago, and it had brought her no closure. This pyre felt truer somehow; better and final.

"Your Majesty," the co-pilot said quietly, "*Dragon Queen* is hailing us. Are we ready to board?"

“Tell them to hold,” Tenel Ka said. “Give us a minute more.”

The co-pilot nodded and relayed the order. Tenel Ka and the others stayed where they were and watched the great worldship, so full of memory and history and tragedy, crumble and burn until it became nothing at all.

EPILOGUE: DIVERGENCES

When Zekk woke up, he found himself staring at the soft off-white ceiling of a medical bay. Waking up itself was a surprise; that he was laid down in some comfortable bed while some medical instrument beeped in time with his heart was even moreso.

Most surprising of all was the voice that said, "You missed quite a show, Jedi."

He turned his head, which hurt less than he was expecting, and saw Taryn Zel sitting on a stool beside his bed, one long leg crossed over the other, a datapad in her lap. She had a tight, satisfied smile on her face.

"What kind of show?" He asked. His voice came out stronger than he'd expected.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

He thought a moment: the claustrophobic airlock, the world spinning outside, the body pinned beneath him and the Force-calls from the Jedi on the ship flying parallel with a tumbling freighter.

He said, "Saving your life."

White teeth slipped into her smile. "I suppose you don't remember my thanking you for it?"

"I can't say I do." He was pretty sure he would have.

Without prelude, Taryn leaned all the way over his bed and kissed him on the mouth. It was firm but short,

and when she pulled away she settled back on her stool, almost primly.

"Um," Zekk said, "Was that like the first time?"

"More or less."

He touched his lip, like he was feeling for her warmth. "Okay. Sorry I missed it."

"Don't worry about that. It wasn't your fault."

He tried to sit upright in his bed; his neck ached and he leaned his head back against the bedframe. "How long have I been out?"

"Less than twelve hours. You're currently aboard the sick bay on *Dragon Queen*. Our doctors also sedated you so they could have a look inside that skull of yours."

"Was something wrong with it? My skull?"

"Minor cracks, easily mended."

"I'm glad." He paused, thought, and asked, "*Dragon Queen*? Tenel Ka brought her flagship here?"

"Indeed. That was before she ever knew you were alive, let alone that you were here. The queen was very determined to stop the threat presented by the Vong bioweapon."

"Is she safe? Tenel Ka?"

"Of course. Everyone was recovered. The gunship you arrived on also survived the battle, with some minor scratches. Unfortunately, the mercenaries who attacked us escaped, save for a few starfighters without hyperdrives. Their pilots surrendered and have been quite compliant, but none of them know who hired them for the job."

"You think it's that Ducha Markessa woman?"

"I know it. I still need to prove it. Moff Westermal, alas, only knew to pick up Sinsor Khal because Jacen Solo told him too, which probably means he was the one communicating with Markessa too."

“Sounds like a dead end. What happens to the moff?”

“It sounds as though Praelyx is looking to ransom him. I imagine he will get quite a handsome fee, probably more than we paid him.”

“Huh. Lucky captain.”

“Indeed. But the fact is, holding Markessa accountable for her crimes is still something that must be done.” She leaned forward a little. “And you need to help me.”

“I need to get back to the Jedi.” For some reason his words felt hollow.

“What you need is to finish what you started. The bioweapon has been neutralized, but the Queen, your friend, is still threatened by scheming nobles.”

“Isn’t she *always* threatened by scheming nobles?”

“Exactly. That’s why it would be very, very handy to have a Jedi in the Lorellian Court. Add to that, you’re a male.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Most Hapan men are not as... capable as you. The Queen’s enemies would doubly underestimate you, if they look at you twice at all.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“And you could ensure the wellbeing of one of your oldest friends.”

“Taryn, I-”

“And I, personally, would be quite happy to spend more time in your company.”

He had to smile at that. “I’d sort of figured that part out.”

“The other parts still stand,” Taryn said seriously. “I know you need to think about this, Zekk, but I really do believe your efforts would be best spent here. I’m sure Tenel Ka would agree.”

"I know," he said, and in truth the idea of spending more time on Hapes with the friend he'd seen so tragically little of- the friend who'd fallen in love with Jacen, sired his child, and lost them both, all without Zekk being the wiser- was strong, but he'd spent his whole adult life a part of the Jedi order. It was hard to simply turn away from it.

Taryn reached out and lightly stroked his forehead. "You have some time to think about it, Zekk, and you can talk to Tenel Ka about it later, but I truly think this is what's best for you."

"You do seem pretty interested in my well-being."

"You nearly died saving my life. Why shouldn't I try to return the favor?"

"I thought you already did." His lips pressed in a smirk.

She pressed a finger against them, stifling any response. "This is a fact, as my cousin would say. This is also one. Anyone can lose themselves in regrets, in things they could have done, promises they should have kept. The real challenge is learning to look to the future, even if it means you have to push aside things you once held as precious."

He moved his head to one side, out from beneath her fingertip, and said, "For the future?"

"Yes." Taryn leaned close once more and kissed him again. "The future is what we live for."

She left him after that, left him to lay in his bed and think about what she'd said.

After that, the dreams went away.

Tahiri wasn't sure at first. After their rescue and flight to *Dragon Queen*, Tahiri had been as exhausted as everyone else, and she'd almost collapsed into the bunk she'd been hastily provided on the Hapan ship.

But she'd fallen, easily and unselfconsciously, into sleep, and it wasn't until after she'd woken up that she realized she hadn't been dreaming.

That was no guarantee in itself that she was free. The trip back to Hapes was took several days; she supposed she could have gone to see Zekk, but she had no idea what to say to him, other than bland well-wishes. He knew what she'd gone through down on the worldship, maybe better than she knew herself. She knew she'd feel exposed under his gaze.

There were other people to talk to. On Tenel Ka's orders, *Dragon Queen's* techs reeled the battered freighter *Mandala* inside its main hangar for repairs. Tahiri knew she should and would talk to Zekk eventually, nervously or no, but she wouldn't have long to see Vjarna, and she knew she owed the Bimm payment and a conversation.

She found him, as expected, in the docking bay. His ears kept twitching nervously as he paced around the ship, watching the Hapan technicians patch its hull and repair its engines. The ship looked more battered than the Millennium *Falcon* had ever been, and the thought filled Tahiri with melancholy.

"You don't need to worry," she said as introduction. "I'm sure they'll take good care of your ship."

"I should hope so," the Bimm muttered, then forced himself to sound brighter as Tahiri stepped alongside him. "On the bright side, with that new engine work, she should run smoother than ever."

"She's yours now."

"I know. I'll need to find a co-pilot."

Vjarna didn't glance at her, thankfully. She didn't want to step foot in Muro's ship ever again. She said, "I'm sure you can find someone. Just offer to split every payment fifty-fifty."

"Just like Rahley did," Vjarna said wistfully.

"Yeah, but you might as well keep the one from this job for yourself. I just transferred it to your account, by the way."

"Tell me, Tahiri... How did she die?"

Tahiri's breath stopped in her throat. It made sense that he wouldn't have heard what happened down on the worldship; she'd even heard Trista icily informing Praelyx and his men to keep all details of the operation confidential.

When she didn't answer right away, the Bimm said, "I did the best I could up here. Got *Mandala* all beaten up, you can tell, but I did what I could."

"I heard you helped shoot down a gunship," Tahiri smiled, eager to change topics.

"I was doing what I could. They were going to kill us." Vjarna's ear twitched. "I know you lost some other people down there too, some of Praelyx's men."

"That's right." No change after all, no escaping it.

"So. How did she die?"

Tahiri closed her eyes, saw the woman standing in the laboratory chamber with her rifle raised and a charge ticking away on her belt, cold determination on her face but regret in her eyes.

She opened them and said, "We'd gone down deep inside the worldship, into the warrens, to find the lab with the bioweapon. There was a point where the Imperials jumped us. We ended up having to fight our way out. Muro didn't make it."

Vjarna nodded in sad acceptance. He didn't even suspect it was a lie. She envied him and felt sorry for him at the same time.

"I'll miss her," he said. "She was a good partner. A good woman."

There wasn't anything Tahiri could say to that one.

Vjarna sighed and looked back to his ship. "Maybe I should talk to Praelyx before I head out. He might have some connections for me."

"Maybe he'll even offer you a job."

"I don't know if I'd like to run with his crew. I have a feeling he might take some jobs I wouldn't like. It was better when it was just me and Rahley, doing the jobs we wanted, going anywhere we could."

It sounded like a good life to Tahiri, still, after everything. She didn't want to tell that to Vjarna, though, lest he get the wrong impression, so she said, "I'm sure you'll find another good partner, Vjarna. In my experience, beings like you are hard to come by."

She left it like that: him feeling mildly pleased and her relieved to have the conversation done. That night, though, she lay down in her bunk and wondered if the dreams would come again.

They did not, best she could tell. She woke up wondering if she'd ever dream of Myrkr or the voxyn again. It was a nice thought, that all her old anxieties and crises had burned up in the planet's atmosphere with the shattered worldship, but it was also hard to believe. The universe, she'd learned again and again, was not a merciful place.

The next day she decided to go over to *Wayward Soldier*. The vessel needed repairs of its own, also provided on Tenel Ka's orders, but they were far less severe. When she took the jumper shuttle over to the gunship, she was surprised to find herself greeted by the hulking Baragwin first officer.

"I never thought I'd see another Jedi on this ship," he snorted. "Will the wonders never cease?"

"I'd like to talk to your captain," she said.

Chazdrul Harn snorted again. "Well. At least *you* have the courtesy to *ask*."

She was led up through the ship to what was apparently Praelyx's private cabin. It looked as normal as any other cabin on any other ship. Praelyx was even waiting there for her, wearing his captain's jacket and oogolith masquer, offering to share a bottle of lomin-ale.

"No thanks," she said in Yuuzhan Vong. "I just want to talk."

His face scrunched slightly in a frown. He said in the same tongue, "I haven't carried a conversation in this language in some time."

"Me neither. But you remember it, don't you?" Still in Yuuzhan Vong.

"I grew up with it. It's hard to forget."

"I know. So did I."

His eyes narrowed. "You are her, then. The Jedi-who-was-shaped."

"That's right. I didn't know if you'd heard of me."

"Oh, I have." Praelyx uncorked his bottle of ale and poured a glass half-full. He picked it up, sniffed it, and drank a mouthful. "In the beginning, I kept my ears open for all kinds of news about my.... Old kin."

"Then what happened?"

He chuckled. "I believe my *new* kind have a statement about... 'becoming the mask.'"

"Did you want to become it? Or did it happen gradually?"

He sighed and settled down in a chair. "Both, perhaps. Tell me, Jedi, how do you think a ship packed with dozens of warriors and one intendant can crash, and only the intendant survives?"

She frowned and took the seat opposite his. "Tell me. How?"

"You can guess." He ran his free hand over his masquered face. "We landed in a dense battle zone on the outskirts of a city. Mercenaries saw our ship go

down and crowded us on all sides. The Hutts were offering extra payment, you see, for the severed head of any Yuuzhan Vong their mercenaries retrieved.”

Tahiri winced, but he added, “Say what you will about them, but the Hutts know how to incentivize their employees. My spies had already picked up that tidbit, and when our ship went down I knew we’d be outnumbered, outfought and probably decapitated in a very grisly fashion.”

“So you ran.”

“I ran. And the warriors, being warriors, fought to the grisly end. I had a masquer onhand, you see, and that was what saved me. There were so many mercenaries, and they were all jostling for trophies, so nobody paid much attention to one human slinking away from the fray.”

“Did you feel guilty for what you did?”

It was a simple question, but a hard one. Praelyx took another sip of his drink and looked down at his glass. “When I escaped I did it in the heat of panic. Later on, looking back, I thought of the warriors I’d left to die. They weren’t bad sorts, for warriors.” He smirked softly, maybe remembering all the old caste rivalries that had seemed so important. “But the old life was gone. The only life I had was the one I’d run into. And so I lived it, every day since.”

“Do you regret running?”

“No,” he said at once. “Even if I did once, this is the life I live now.”

“Then why were you so intent on going down to the worldship? What did you think you would gain there?” He didn’t answer right away, and she pressed, “I could tell how relieved you were when that worldship burned up. How satisfied.”

“And you were not?”

"I had a lot of history in that place."

"History," he sniffed, "Is something I can do without."

"Then why go to the worldship? Why take the risk? We almost died down there."

He considered her carefully for a minute before he said, "Would you believe that I simply wanted to be *sure*?"

Sure that past was past, sure that he'd chosen the right life all those years ago.

"Yes," she said, "I believe you."

"Excellent." He took a sip of lomin-ale and asked, "Did you come all this way to talk about *that*?"

"Not exactly." She looked down at her hands as they clasped her kneecaps. "Captain... Would you consider taking me on as a crew member?"

Praelyx's silence seemed to go on forever. When she forced herself to look up he was leaning back in his chair, sipping the last of his lomin-ale and not even looking at her.

"Captain?" she repeated. "Did you hear my question?"

"Of course I heard it." He was suddenly brusque. "Why the devil would I want a *Jedi* on my ship?"

She tried not to wince. "I can offer a lot of skills."

"I know. Most of them wouldn't make my crew very happy. A lot of them used to work for the Peace Brigade, you know. They're not the Jedi-loving type, by and large. I don't think they're *your* type either."

For some reason she felt relief instead of disappointment. Somehow, she'd thought that slipping onto *Wayward Soldier* would grant her some kind of anonymity amongst all these privateers and rough-types; amongst all these strangers she wouldn't feel the pressure of her past.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I just wanted to ask."

"Shouldn't you be going back to the Jedi Order, wherever they're hiding? They *are* your type, aren't they?"

"I don't have a type. I don't have anyone." She looked down at her hands again. She had no type and certainly no family. Once the Solos had been that, but she'd ruined that more surely than she'd ruined her ties to the Jedi Order. Even if Anakin's mother could forgive Tahiri for turning a lightsaber on her, Tahiri knew she couldn't forgive herself.

No matter what, past wasn't past, not for Tahiri.

"What about Zonama Sekot?" Praelyx asked.

"I wouldn't be welcome there, not after what I've done." She didn't know if Praelyx was aware of all the horrible things she'd done in service of Darth Caedus. If he knew, he didn't say.

"You do have special skills, I'll give you that." Praelyx rested his empty cup on a side-table and leaned forward, elbows on knees. "It sounds like you need time to run by yourself, figure out what you really need. Bounty-hunting might be up your alley."

"Bounty hunting," she repeated. She couldn't shake the image of thugs in battered, faceless helmets.

"At the moment, Miss Veila, I believe you could be anything you want." Praelyx leaned back in his chair. "Just because you were something once doesn't mean you have to stay that thing forever. Your fate is what you choose."

He'd said it to encourage her. She could tell that from his voice, from her Vongsense, and what he'd said was undoubtedly true. After so many years of being defined by the Yuuzhan Vong, the Jedi, Anakin and Jacen most of all, she was suddenly in a place with no master and no rules other than what she decided for herself.

It was a lonely place to be, and deep down, at the center of herself, she found the angry determination that had been in her heart when she'd killed Gilad Pellaeon, and when she'd killed Rahley Muro.

And because of that, Praelyx's words gave her so little comfort.

When *Dragon Queen* dropped out of hyperspace over Hapes, Tenel Ka was in her personal salon located one deck beneath the bridge, and from its broad viewport she could see the planet spread out beneath her like a blue-green jewel. Growing up she'd always dreaded spending time on Hapes, and for so long after becoming queen this place had come to feel like a prison, a prison so dreadful she'd needed brief escapes with Jacen to feel like her old self.

Now, though, the sight of Hapes warmed her. It was curious and inexplicable, but she thought it might have something to do with the person standing beside her.

"It really is a very pretty world," Zekk said.

"Despite its ugly underside, I believe you're right," Tenel Ka said. He didn't respond, and she didn't need the Force to tell he was pensive, undecided.

"I'm sure Taryn gave you an offer to stay on Hapes as part of my Lorellian Court."

"That's right."

"It's my offer too."

After another thoughtful pause he asked, "What is it, your Lorellian Court?"

"It is the secret security organization passed down from queen to queen. Their fealty is to her alone."

"I don't think you'd have to worry about any of your Duchas buying me off," Zekk smiled a little.

"I'm sure not, friend Zekk. And you know it would be very, very good to have you here." She hesitated,

wondering if it would show too much vulnerability, before adding, "I need all the good friends I can get."

It she was showing weakness, Zekk wouldn't fault her for it. She knew that. She could sense him wavering, edging closer to accepting her offer but not quite there.

She knew what would convince him. She leaned in a little closer, lowered her voice, and said, "My daughter does also."

He looked at her. "But Tenel Ka, your—"

She held up a hand to silence him. "You have heard what the rest of the galaxy has heard, correct?"

He nodded.

"I will tell you something very important, something I have not even told Taryn or Trista. I'm telling you this as a show of trust."

He nodded again.

"Allana is alive. And she is with her grandparents."

His eyes widened with a suspicion, a question. She nodded once, and it a revelation.

It was shocking and it was sad, all the more because he should have been there for his friends, he should have known it all along, should have done *something* to keep things from turning out this way.

"Oh, Tenel Ka," he breathed, "I thought she might be.... But I didn't know. I should have known. I should have—"

He placed her finger on his lips. "It is not your fault, friend Zekk. There were... many mistakes made. But Allana is not one of them. She is with the Solos now, and safe. That is all that matters."

She took her hand away and he said no more. He looked thoughtfully at the planet below, the latest revelations whirling through his mind. Underneath his shock and confusion she felt a familiar sadness, a

sadness she knew would never go away completely for anything who had known and cared about Jacen Solo.

"It is hard," she said carefully, "To let go of the past. Sometimes mistakes are made which can never be fixed, and-

"I know," Zekk exhaled. "You just have to look to the future. Funny, I never thought it would be Taryn who'd get it through my head."

"Taryn is a wealth of surprises."

"I've noticed," he chuckled and put his hands on his belt. "You know, even if I do stay with you, I'd need to call the Jedi, let them know I'm okay."

"In time," she nodded. "However, I'd very much prefer that you finish your existing business beforehand."

"You mean Ducha Markessa? Taryn seemed keen to go after her."

"She blames herself for not catching her scheme sooner," Tenel Ka said, then added, "It is all right to dwell on some regrets, so long as they're in your power to fix."

"I think this one we can wrap up," Zekk nodded. "You can tell Taryn I'll help."

"Ah," she raised an eyebrow. "Aha. I imaged *you* would want to tell her."

He laughed nervously. "Yeah, I guess it's better if I do it myself." His expression grew more serious. "Not yet, though. I think there's someone else I need to talk to first."

Tahiri was back in *Dragon Queen's* hangar bay, this time waiting for the shuttle that would ferry her over to *Wayward Soldier*. The gunship must have made for a rare sight in Hapes' skylaneships, but it hugged close to *Dragon Queen*, marking it as an ally instead of a threat.

She felt Zekk enter the hangar before she saw him. She felt a flush of memory, recalling the time she'd been ready to leave the Fountain Palace and Jaina Solo had caught up to her to deliver a final message that set her on the course that, eventually, had brought her back round to Hapes.

She wondered if she should mention it to Zekk. She wondered if he wanted to hear about Jaina at all. As she turned to face him, she decided to keep that bit of information to herself.

Instead she dropped her bag at her feet, put her hands on her hips, and said, "I kind of figured you'd come to see me off."

"Why is that?" Zekk asked honestly.

"Because we couldn't avoid each other forever. I'm glad you recovered, by the way."

"So am I. Thanks for saving me."

"Tenel Ka was the one who found you in that spinning deathtrap. I just helped."

"Still. Thank you."

Awkward silence passed between them. She looked down at her feet and said, "I'm skipping over to *Wayward Soldier* soon. But you probably already knew that."

"Are you joining up with Praelyx?" He asked, incredulous.

She shook her head. "He wouldn't have me. But he said he can give me a ride over to Ord Mantell and hook me up with some... associates."

"Associates," Zekk repeated.

"Bounty hunters. Praelyx recommended it but I was already thinking I might try my hand. That's what you did after your brush with the dark, wasn't it?"

"That was a long time ago. And it was more than a brush."

"I know. So was mine." She still couldn't look up, but she said, "When I triggered that detonator and blew the shuttle, I did it with anger in me. You know that."

"You also saved the mission."

"There should have been a better way. When I killed them, I found all the places in me that were bitter and angry and *that* was what was in my when I channeled the Force. It's the same thing I did when I killed Pellaeon and Shevu."

"You've been through a lot. We both have. That's what makes it easy to give in. There's so much fuel to the fire."

"And Jacen?" She picked her head up and looked him in the eye. "What about him? When he did all those things, those *awful* things, what was fueling him? Anger?"

"You'd know better than I," he said softly, without reproach.

"He could get angry, *very* angry, when things didn't go his way, but I don't think that was what fueled him."

"Neither do I. Jacen was always searching for things. For an answer, a question, a purpose."

"I think whatever he found convinced him he was justified in what he did."

"Then what did he find?"

Tahiri looked away. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"Then I guess we never will."

Caedus yawned between them. Tahiri didn't want them to part like this and struggled with something to say. When she couldn't come up with something he volunteered, "I'll be staying on Hapes for a little while. I have some work to do that has to stay secret, so I'd appreciate you not telling the Jedi I'm around."

She frowned. "They need to know you're alive. Jaina needs it."

"I know." He smiled sadly. "I'll make it all clear eventually, I promise. I just need to take care of a few things first."

She was pretty sure one of those things was Taryn Zel, but that was no excuse to blow off Jaina entirely. But then, Zekk needed to move beyond his regrets as much as she did.

"Do you plan to go back to the Jedi? In time?"

"I think so." He tilted his head. "Do you?"

She stared down at her boots again, unsure of what to say. She wanted to tell him *yes*, but deep down, in her heart, she didn't know if she could ever be worthy to call herself one again, not when so much darkness still lingered in her heart. Then she wondered if she wanted to be one at all.

She picked her head up, forced a smile, and said, "I'll let you know. I'll see you again, Zekk, I'm sure of it."

He nodded, as warmly as he could. He took a step close to her and she took a half-step away. Somehow a hug didn't seem right, not after everything. Instead she extended a hand. He took it and shook firmly.

Then, without a word, Tahiri picked up her bag, turned, and started toward the shuttle, toward *Wayward Soldier* and whatever future awaited. Her steps were heavy, but she walked without looking back.

Read on for a sample of...

Hour of Judgment
By Gregory O. Scott

A year has passed since the Emperor's death. Regent Ysanne Isard has consolidated her control on Coruscant and struggles to hold the Empire together against the self-proclaimed warlords who are tearing it apart. Meanwhile, the glow of New Republic's triumph at Endor is beginning to fade, and the rebellion-turned-government is trying to find new ways to establish itself in a galaxy that is increasingly fractured and chaotic. To do that, it has tasked a secret team of assassins with the job of eliminating the Empire's elite Grand Admirals- by any means necessary.

At this time, the Empire's greatest fighter ace, Baron Soontir Fel, has defected to Wedge Antilles' Rogue Squadron. Two former enemies are drawn together by the need to save one woman from Isard's vengeance: Fel's wife and Wedge's sister. Fel, Rogue Squadron, and Isard all search for Syal Antilles, but another party is closest to finding her: the rogue stormtrooper unit called the Hand of Judgment, acting on orders of the enigmatic Thrawn. The thirteenth grand admiral's priorities are his own, his agenda a mystery.

Before this epic tale of war, politics, and espionage is over, families will be united and broken, the Republic will be forced to reckon with three of the Empire's legendary Grand Admirals, and soldiers on both sides will make the final choice of where their loyalties lies.

The planet beneath had turned its night-side to face them, leaving only a narrow yellow-green crescent to shine with the light of its reflected sun. The night-blackness of Lhwekk made the battle in orbit all the more visible. A dozen black-hulled destroyers of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet formed a blockading ring around the planet, and every one of them was engaged in heated battle with the defending war-ships of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium.

The Ssi-ruuvi vessels, each one ovular and almost resembling a three-eyed face, engaged with the enemy with desperate ferocity. *Shree*-class battle cruisers, as massive as the largest Chiss destroyers, fired volley after volley from their turbolaser cannons and took the Chiss destroyers head-on while smaller *Wurrif*-class light cruisers tried to take the Chiss on their flanks. The Chiss warships were capable enough of a brutal slugging match, but their defensive batteries struggled to counter the Ssi-ruuvi battle droids. Pyramid-shaped fighters, each only two meters tall and armed with cannons at every corner, tumbled and danced through space in swarms like hungry fleshgnats. Powered by the life energy of captured slaves, the tiny drones weren't constrained by the stress of physics on living pilots and could fly literal circles around the clawcraft squadrons fielded by the Chiss.

Into the fray glided three pale wedge-shaped warships, unmistakably Imperial. The smallest, the *Immobilizer*-class interdiction vessel *Corvus*, hung in the rear, its four spherical gravity well generators currently dormant. Ahead of it, the mile-long destroyers *Grey Wolf* and *Admonitor* entered the battle zone together.

Captain Dagon Niriz stood on *Grey Wolf's* bridge, hands clasped behind his back, watching, waiting for the admiral seated beside him to give the order to engage. It had been four years since he'd been assigned to the side

of then-captain Thrawn. At first, he'd been skeptical and frankly insulted to take orders from a strange alien commander in worthless, uncharted space. Everything that had happened since had taught him to trust Thrawn's judgment. He'd been at the man's side through battles against warlord Nuso Esva and their hunt for treasonous Grand Admiral Zaarin, after which Thrawn had received his well-deserved reward and filled Zaarin's place as one of the Emperor's twelve elite.

Just as he'd learned to trust Thrawn in that time, he'd seen strange, exotic wonders he'd never imagined in his old life in the Core. These Ssi-ruuk were profoundly alien- massive saurian beasts, religious fanatics from an isolated star cluster who powered their war machine with the harvested life energy of countless captives- but in his time, Niriz had seen stranger.

One thing Niriz hadn't seen was Thrawn's own government, the one that had exiled him two decades ago. If Thrawn had had any contact with the Chiss Ascendancy in that time, Niriz hadn't heard about it. Yet here he was, coming to aid them as they struggled to strike the killing blow against the Ssi-ruuk.

Niriz wondered if they'd welcome the help.

They hung for a few minutes outside the battle zone, giving Thrawn time to analyze the fight as he sat in his command chair, hands folded in front of him, glowing red eyes narrowed in thought. Finally, he said, calmly, barely loud enough for Niriz to hear, "Captain, open a hailing frequency to the Chiss flagship."

"Yes, sir." Niriz paused. "Which vessel is that, sir?"

Thrawn's white-gloved hand gestured out the viewport. "The third vessel to the left of the daylight crescent. Can you see the extra pickets protecting it, Captain?"

"Ah, yes, sir."

"Good. Hail them and say we are here to help. Tell them if we do not receive orders within two minutes, we will begin acting of our own initiative against the Ssi-ruuk."

"Very good, sir."

Niriz hurried over to the comm station and relayed the

order. The bridge crew was a strange mélange, half human and half a mix of aliens collected from across the Unknown Regions, including green-scaled Troukree, blue-skinned, red-eyed Chiss personally loyal to Thrawn, and more. It was something else he'd never have imagined back in the Core. The one thing they had in common was that they all looked nervous.

Two minutes went by and there was no response. When he reported it to Thrawn, the grand admiral seemed unsurprised.

"We will act on our own initiative, then," he said calmly. "We'll begin by doing something about those fighter screens. First, move us close enough so we draw the enemy's attention. Tell Captain Parck to do the same. *Corvus* is to hold position outside the battle zone."

As ordered, *Grey Wolf* and Parck's *Admonitor* descended as one into Lwhekk's orbit. The closest Chiss vessel was taking heavy fire from a pair of *Wurrif*-class cruisers. On the star destroyers' approach, they began to shift position, putting the Chiss destroyer in between them and the new-comers while continuing to pound the destroyer's flank.

From his place at the tactical station, Niriz reported, "Admiral, that assault carrier in lower orbit is coming up to meet us. It's launching fighters."

"Launch missile boats. Tell Captain Parck to do the same."

Niriz had studied all the intelligence they had on the Ssi-ruuk, and he knew that a *Sh'ner*-class carrier like the one approaching could carry over one hundred of those pesky droid starfighters. He also knew that the vessel itself was lightly-defended compared to a large cruiser. The hard part would be getting close enough to destroy it.

One squadron of missile boats dropped out of *Grey Wolf*, another out of *Admonitor*. The fighter-sized attack craft had been designed for a single purpose during the hunt for Grand Admiral Zaarin: to counter Zaarin's TIE Defenders. These Ssi-ruuvi fighters were tiny and disposable, the exact opposite of Defenders, but Thrawn seemed

confident the same tactics would be successful here.

The missile boats streaked ahead in a tight line, and the Ssi-ruuvi fighter swarm raced to meet them. Then the boats fired their missiles as one; two warheads each from two dozen fighters streaked ahead, trailing tight parallel thrust-trails that quickly became white tangles as the missiles locked on and tracked their dancing targets.

The missiles used to counter Zaarin's TIE Defenders had been designed to punch through heavy shields. These warheads were modified to explode one quarter second before impact, in order to better catch more tiny, vulnerable fighters with a maximum yield burst. A chain of explosions spread out in front of them; the missile boats peeled into a tight loop so they could make another pass.

When the explosions died down and sensor readings came in, it was clear that the high-yield missiles had done their job. The wave of fighters had been cut nearly in half. One more coordinated volley from the missile boats cut them even deeper. After that, *Grey Wolf* launched its TIE fighters to pick off the remaining droids.

"Captain," Thrawn said when it was done, "Move us in to engage the carrier. Tell Captain Parck to take out those two light cruisers. Send both squads of missile boats to help. Also, have *Corvus* get ready to raise her interdiction field."

After Niriz relayed the order, he watched as the assault carrier swelled in their forward viewport. To the side, he could see *Admonitor* move on the crippled Chiss destroyer. The two *Wurif* light cruisers turned and ran, and Parck's vessel slipped past the destroyer to pursue.

The assault carrier, unexpectedly vulnerable, tried to run toward the planet's surface. That was when Thrawn gave the order for *Corvus* to fire up its gravity wells. By creating a second gravitational pull, as strong as Lwhekk's itself, they arrested the carrier's descent. As its engines strained to adjust to the sudden shift, *Grey Wolf* opened fire with its forward turbolasers. After three volleys, they punched through the carrier's shields and

exploded its engine section. Its hull disintegrating, its propulsion gone, the carrier began a fiery plunge toward the planet's night side face.

Muted cheers rippled across the bridge as the crew watched the assault carrier's tumble into Lwhekk's atmosphere.

"I believe we have our opening," Thrawn said. "Captain, launch ground assault teams."

"All of them, sir?"

"All. Delegate a fighter squadron to escort the Five Hundred and First. Make sure they get to the capital."

"Yes, sir."

"And Captain, tell *Corvus* to shut down her gravity well, but be ready to raise it again. Take us to help Captain Parck."

Niriz understood what he was aiming for. This Imperial and Chiss vessels had artificial gravity systems that could compensate for *Corvus*'s second gravwell. On Ssi-ruuk vessels, which required far fewer crew than their enemies' vessels, the artificial gravity systems were less advanced. By raising and lowering its grav well at intervals, *Corvus* could keep the Ssi-ruuk literally off-balance.

After they launched the ground assault teams, *Grey Wolf* pivoted to cut across the planet's lower orbit and catch up with *Admonitor*. Parck's vessel had destroyed one light cruiser but the second had fled into the protective range of two *Shree*-class heavy cruisers. Both vessels were pummeling *Admonitor* head-on and Parck had turned his vessel to show them his starboard length. He was firing broadsides at both vessels and spreading their attacks across a larger span of his shields, but he still wouldn't last much longer.

The Chiss destroyers, for their part, seemed unwilling to help.

The light cruiser Parck had been chasing spun around to harass *Grey Wolf* as it hurried to *Admonitor*'s aid. As the bridge rocked under its assault, Niriz heard one of the tactical ensigns, a human, mutter, "Some help the Admiral's people are."

“Remind me why we’re sticking out necks out for them,” grunted another human.

Niriz should have admonished them, but he agreed. The Chiss fleet seemed perfectly satisfied to let its wayward son die here, after he’d come all this way to help them.

“Captain,” Thrawn called, still seated calmly in his command chair, “Tell *Corvus* to fire up her gravity wells.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

“And launch all our Starwings, with escorts. It’s time to put them to work.”

As expected, the raising of the interdiction field caused the light cruiser to falter. At the same time, two full squadrons of Xg-1 Starwing craft dropped out of *Grey Wolf*’s hangar. The basis for missile boats, Starwings were small, dedicated anti-capital ship attack craft. The experimental ships had never gained widespread production in the Imperial navy but, like missile boats, Thrawn had an attachment to their capacity for quick, direct strikes.

While a squadron of TIEs tried to keep another swarm of droid fighters off their backs, the Starwings raced to intercept the light cruiser. Two passes were all it took to cripple the vessel, and as *Grey Wolf* pulled ahead its aft turbolaser cannons cracked open the vessel’s hull and spilled its entrails into space.

After that, the Starwings raced ahead to help *Admonitor*. *Grey Wolf* pulled to a higher elevation so that its diamond hull crossed over *Admonitor*’s broadside at a perpendicular angle. As the missile boats lit up the swarms of attacking droid fighters, the Starwings began their initial assault on the heavy cruiser sitting on the inner edge of Lwhekk’s orbit. *Admonitor* and *Grey Wolf* fired concentrated volleys on both ships, but the Starwings cracked open their target’s shields first. With its defenses overwhelmed, the cruiser was helpless and both destroyers shifted their fire to tear up the cruiser’s face. Its engines sputtered and died and it began to drift in space, falling slowly toward Lwhekk’s surface.

There was just a hint of satisfaction in Thrawn's voice as the grand admiral said, "Captain, tell *Corvus* to revive her gravity well."

When the interdicator brought her field online, the dying cruiser was arrested in its fall. Then, slowly, it began to be tugged in the opposite direction by *Corvus*' gravitational pull. The other cruiser, now desperately holding off two star destroyers, was unable to move out of the way as its dead sibling was smashed against its starboard flank. Its shields, already overwhelmed, simply died. The two cruisers smashed together, scraping apart hull armor and opening decks to the vacuum. *Admonitor* and *Grey Wolf* continued their fire, tearing both ships to pieces.

The cheers that time were less muted. Even Niriz allowed himself a grin as he marched up to Thrawn and asked, "What now, sir?"

The grand admiral wasn't smiling. Red eyes narrowed in thought, he said, "I believe it's time we try hailing the Chiss flagship again. Perhaps now they're more willing to speak."

Niriz doubted that somehow, but he turned to give the order anyway. Before he could open his mouth, one of the tactical lieutenants shouted, "Sirs! They're changing tactics!"

"Explain," said Thrawn.

"It's the picket ships. They're picking up speed and... They're accelerating to the nearest destroyers."

"All power to shields!" Niriz snapped.

They shunted energy to the bridge shields just in time to stop a *Fw'Sen*-class picket ship on a suicide run. The impact and explosion still rocked the command deck hard, nearly knocking Niriz off his feet. The Ssi-ruuk had dozens of those ships, each one no bigger than a tramp freighter and crewed only by the brown-scaled P'w'eck undercaste. During the intel briefings, there had been some debate as to whether the P'w'eck had minds of their own and might turn on their overlords. Now the answer was clear.

The Ssi-ruuk masters had ordered all their slaves to die,

and the slaves were dying without question. Somewhere beneath the panic, Niriz felt sick.

Voice tense, Thrawn said, "Tell all missile boats and Starwings to kill those pickets. Targets of opportunity. Don't stop until they're all destroyed."

The attack vessels broke formation and began their pursuit of the suicidal pickets. On Thrawn's orders, they ranged far beyond *Grey Wolf's* defensive zone and started picking off ships making runs on the Chiss vessels. They did the best they could, with the help of the CEDF's clawcraft, but the pickets were too many and too determined to die. A pair of pickets slammed into a Chiss destroyer's engine sections; the resulting explosion consumed the whole ship. Another picket caught a destroyer with weak bridge shields and vaporized the entire command deck.

The CEDF pickets and starfighters did their best to keep the command ship safe, but the suicidal P'w'eck ships seemed drawn to it. One ship slammed into its bow shields; another into its dorsal section. The second one tore open the defensive screen as it died, and shrapnel and debris ripped through a section of the flagship's hull. A trio of pickets slipped past the clawcraft and raced for the bridge. Before they could ram, a pair of missile boats dropped behind them and unleashed a wave that caught all three. Their hulls cracked and burst into flame. Twisted metal skidded and skipped across the bridge shields but did not tear through.

Finally, when all the pickets were dead, the remaining Ssi-ruuvi ships began to fall back to Lwhekk's inner orbit, like they needed to conference about what to do next.

Niriz was just grateful for the breather.

"Admiral," a Chiss comm officer called, "The CEDF flag-ship just hailed us."

"What did they say?" Thrawn asked.

"Just... 'Thank you,' sir."

Thrawn's stiff body seemed to relax. He sunk back into his chair and, just for a moment, Niriz caught the rarest of sights: a tight, satisfied, smile.

